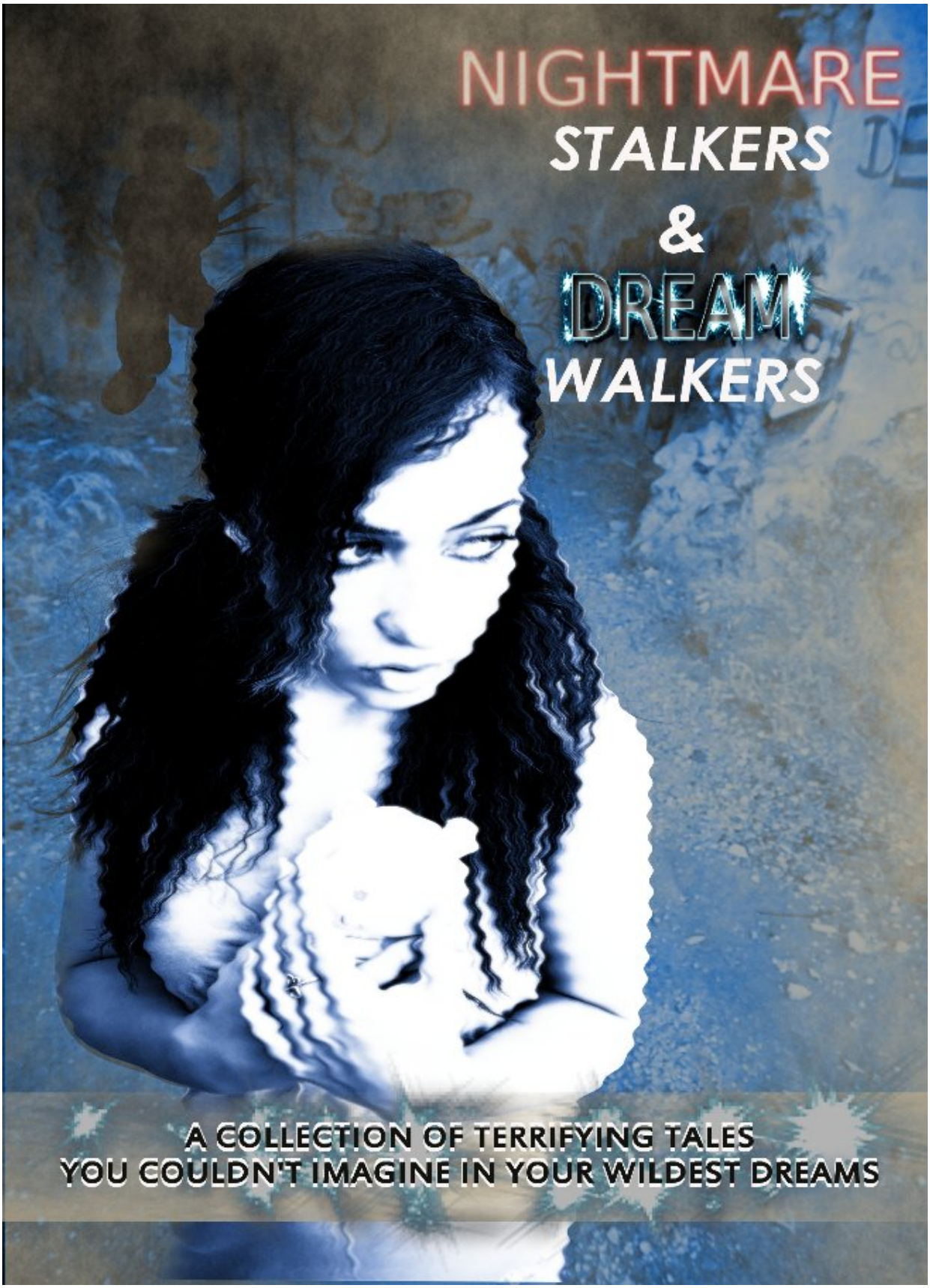

NIGHTMARE
STALKERS
&
DREAM
WALKERS
Top 10 Finisher
Best Anthology
PREDITORS & EDITORS
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A COLLECTION OF TERRIFYING TALES
YOU COULDN'T IMAGINE IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS


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NIGHTMARE STALKERS & DREAM WALKERS

A COLLECTION OF TERRIFYING TALES YOU COULD'NT IMAGINE IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS

Edited by

Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd

COVER ART

"Black Monolith On Rocks" by Victor Habbick

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GRAPHICS

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

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FOREWORD

A big thank you to all the wonderfully talented authors who have given their time, their effort, and their genius to this horror collection of truly remarkable fiction.
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We hope you enjoy this blood-curdling collection of twisted and terrifying tales, and feel free to check out more titles from Horrified Press in the future.

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NIGHTMARE STALKERS & DREAM WALKERS

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Acknowledgments

Fear

- An Introduction

Fear is a truth teller and a liar. There are some things at the depth of a person's core that reveal what they most fear. Fear can inspire people to lie. Without fear, we would have no concept of the need to hide. Without fear, we would understand running, but not fleeing. Moments of fear will sometimes cause us to slip up and tell our deepest truths. Results from the revelations can sometimes be life altering – even life shattering. We ride roller coasters, take public speaking classes, and read horror in order to engage this fear. We sometimes do so to push back; to conquer, to test, and sometimes to understand what truths remain hidden in the shadows. We also fear closing our eyes at night from a very young age. Psychologists who study dreams are drawing consensus that our most intense nightmares begin very young, when our minds aren't yet ready to separate reality from fantasy. We continue to try, in different ways as we grow older, to make sense of our dreams: spiritually, psychoanalytically, and subconsciously. We are fascinated with nightmares, because through them we see a glimpse of a reality concealed in the darkest places of the human mind. .

Dreams are the stuff of weird fiction: Bizarro, Slipstream, Strange Fiction, and probably much of speculative fiction, broadly owe their existence to our ability to dream. Scientists, artists, and authors have attributed much of their work to having been inspired by dreams. Ideas that churn beneath the surface weave an endless combination of patterns in our dreams, revealing endless possibilities to our waking minds. I sometimes think creative types just say they get certain ideas from dreams…as a way to cover up their weirdness. We excuse strange thoughts by stating they originated from a dream, or nightmare, because dreams are seen as being out of our control, even though, in reality, they come from the whole cloth of our very own brains. We have all seen the oddities inside ourselves while asleep, and will buy almost any level of disturbing constructions, if we believe they came from someone's dream world.

The difference between a dream and a nightmare is the level of fear it entails. We interpret nightmares by the degree that their images or meaning disturbs us. We draw that border between those nocturnal images, somewhere on the spectrum from dreaming about sorting papers at work, to being chased by a demon in a world where our legs refuse to move. When I

quit teaching, all my nightmares were of going back and setting up my classroom. When I heard the kids coming, I would run. Maybe my nightmare border cheats pretty far into the mundane territory? Maybe, what forms a nightmare is not linear, with easily defined borders. People who experience night terrors often report seeing no real images at all. They experience just pure fear. The greatest terrors in our heads may be an unleashed fear without any borders, which some glimpse in those unseen night terrors.

It is curious that some people remember a nightmare for years, decades even, while a more pleasant dream can be completely forgotten mere moments after we wake. We struggle to recall some curious or interesting piece of a dream, only to find it has escaped us. We are haunted by some impression or feeling left behind, even though we can't get back that elusive detail that somehow feels important.

It remains out of reach.

A lifetime might be spent trying to shake off moments from a nightmare deep in our personal history. There is a dark truth in the nightmare image that burns into our memory, following us into the real world even once we are old enough to differentiate between reality and fantasy. The joke on us all is that we don't believe in ghosts during the light of day, but nightfall opens our minds to infinite scenarios. Nightmares penetrate the darkest corners of our minds and the depths of our souls. We bury things in the layers, and it is when we sleep that nightmares pick their props and set up their scenery.

So, what is the real truth about fear? With truth comes pain. It has sharp edges that we try to sand off, or pad with lies. We try to cut down the dosage of pain with half-truths and lies of omission. If truth is found in our darkest places, could that be why white lies are just the opposite – lies which we build out of light; from a shallow surface carefully designed to hide dark truths; to protect ourselves and others from the pain that is the truth. Fear is connected to truths, and the further we flee from those telling fears, the farther we remain from the truth.

Fear reveals the nakedness behind the dressed up version of who we are, the one we try to sell to others… and to ourselves. What we fear shows where we are broken and damaged. It shows where we are bad and unjust. It shows a full view of the hypocrisy that comes with being human; but we so desperately want to pretend is the problem found in others and not us. We

find the parts of ourselves built in our childhood that form the unstable foundation for adulthood. We discover the mental and emotional monsters that were given a home inside us through abuse, injustice, hate, violation, or the darkness of others that have touched our own lives. Fear is attached to all these truths, and serves as a warning when we are about to stumble upon them.

Authors and publishers avoid dreams in writing for a variety of reasons. Like a character looking into a mirror, dreams in fiction can be handled very badly. Their open nature can allow them to be used as a cheat in storytelling. In the hands of a writer unable to tap the deep fear and important potential of dreams, that writing can come off as shallow and untruthful. On some level, the notion of dreams makes us uncomfortable, and so we don't know what to do with them on the page of a story, either.

This anthology turns that convention on its ear in the true, unsettling spirit of nightmares. Instead of avoiding them or using them to shortcut the story or character development, these stories submerge into the deepest depths of dreams and nightmares, in order to tell the tales. These authors clawed into the shadowy corners and borderless territory of nightmares, to reveal to you the truth found in those darkest places, where fear tempts us to flee or hide. Horror is a tool which uses fear to tell stories in more intense emotion, painted in darker colors. All forms of speculative fiction can be found in dreams. These stories draw their inspiration from that secret world of dreams and nightmares, where people from all walks of life can uncover what is possible.

Fear can be both a truth teller and a liar. In the hands of these authors, be prepared to see striking truth in all forms of dreams and nightmares.

You've been warned...

-JAY WILBURN

Knock Knock

Joel M. Kremer

Ever since that haunted night,
nothing was ever really the same,
The closet door of six Nelson Drive,
was surely the one to blame.
Hollow bodies, flesh of vultures,
two gruesome, evil beasts,
The nightmare entrance of this world
shall find your soul to feast.
"Knock knock," upon the door so loud,
the little girl did hear,
Before shadows from the gates of the dead,
did quickly to appear.
"Knock knock," again, with eyes icy blue
staring at the morbid pass,
It shook and squealed with screams of pain
loud enough to break thick glass;
"Knock knock," a third, this time with a hiss,
which echoed throughout that house,
Then silence. Nothing. Calm air, indeed.
'Twas as quiet as a mouse.
The girl walked toward the door, mesmerized with fear,
trembling, aching from the shock,
Reaching out to grab, before now again,

one final bang, "knock knock".
The door swung open with such great force
it struck her to the floor,
Hovering over her body, death
approached menacingly from the door.
One glance at the fiend which appeared,
and her eyes spewed bloody red,
Drowning within the flooded corpse
laying still, but not quite dead.
The beast picked her up
to travel back, beyond the darkest door.
A trail of blood and haunting screams
she left upon the floor.
The door slammed shut, her terror became no more.
The wind was calm again,
No shadowed ghouls. No deathly howls.
No torture, freed of pain.
Six Nelson Drive, the door of death,
the closet of nightmares,
The gateway to the dreams of gore
and sickly, haunting scares.
A boy, so young, not knowing of
the door that stirs the talk,
Listens close and hears a sound.
the horror of, "knock knock".
The door creeks open and there stands a girl

who once knew of the fight,
With baby blues, once before the time,
her eyes now black as night.

Joel Matthew Kremer

has been writing since he was twelve years old. From poetry, short stories, plays, horror, romance or even writing songs, Joel's talent was always the ability to adapt. Let's be honest, there's not really any close comparisons between gruesome, terror stories and rap music lyrics. Joel currently resides in Irwin, Pennsylvania, attending college at the Westmoreland County Community College with a major in English. This is his first published piece, but don't take him lightly. Don't be surprised when you see his name popping up out of nowhere. With his swift ability to familiarize himself with any given topic, there's no telling what door Joel will end up knocking upon…

Dreamer

Ben Pienaar

When Dale Cartwright first saw the dreamer, he thought she was something of a looker. Actually, if it wasn't for that, and the content, playful smile on her face, he wouldn't have met her at all. Dale wasn't quite a ladies man, and under ordinary circumstances, he'd have dismissed her out of hand simply because he felt she was unreachable. That day, though, he felt on top of his game, and besides, it was a pleasant day – what harm was a pleasant conversation to go with it?

She was sitting on a park bench, looking down the hill towards the city with an expression of amazement, as though she'd died and woken up in paradise. Dale decided to throw caution to the wind and went to sit next to her, though not too close. She turned to look at him, but he only gazed down at the city for a minute, saying nothing.

Oddly, she didn't take her eyes off him for even a moment, and he found that, for once, *he* was the one getting creeped-out.

"Hello," she said. He turned and saw that she was even better looking close up. Her eyes were wide in a kind of pretty, innocent way, and her features were soft and kind..

"Hi," he replied, smiling. "Enjoying the view?"

She nodded, and continued to stare at him, completely unselfconsciously.

"I'm Dale," he told her, holding out his hand. The girl shook it, looking down at his hand as though she'd never seen one before.

"Daisy," she said distantly.

"Nice name," he said. *Nice cliché line*, *smooth, buddy, real smooth*, he thought. She looked up at him, cocking her head. He had a sudden, bizarre fear that she'd seen right through him then, had read the thoughts right out of his mind…but the girl named Daisy said nothing.

"Are… Are you okay?" he asked after a minute.

She laughed, suddenly, and looked down at the bench, her face turning pink.. "I'm sorry; I know I'm acting strange. It's just… I've just realised that I'm dreaming."

He laughed, sure he'd misheard. "You what?"

"I said, I've just realised I'm dreaming. It's weird, you know, because you don't usually know it when it's happening."

Great, he thought*, she's unstable. Should have known it by the way she was staring out at the city with that vacant look, but nope, you got blindsided by those pretty blue eyes, you dummy.*

"I'm not sure I follow."

"What's not to follow?" Daisy asked. She stood and took in a deep breath of summer air. "So real," she whispered. Dale watched, wondering whether she was harmless, or if maybe there were a bunch of guys in white coats looking for her.

"I don't think you are dreaming," he said.

She turned to look at him, curious. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, if you were dreaming, then I'd have to be part of it, right? I'd have to be some kind of figment of your imagination; not real."

"That's right."

"But I am real, see. I think, therefore I am."

She thought about it, but then shook her head. "I don't buy it," she told him. "I don't think *you* think at all."

"I see…," Dale pondered how to phrase what he was *thinking*. "Well, how about this. Do you know who said it – that quote: 'I think, therefore I am?"

She shook her head.

"It was Descartes."

"What's your point?"

"My point is that I just told you something you didn't know, didn't I? That must mean that I'm real. If I was just part of your imagination, then how could I know something you don't?" As he spoke the words, he couldn't help marvelling at the ridiculous turn the conversation had taken.

"Assuming that's the truth. But you could have made it up, and that's something my imagination could do, easy-peasy." She took another step down the hill and spun around, as if she was trying to take in everything at once. "Isn't it amazing?" she said. "It's all so… I mean I know I'm dreaming, but I've never really experienced a dream like this. It's so full of possibility."

He knew it was folly by now – knew that there was no way to just convince a mad person that they were mad with logic, but he'd thought of something else.

While he thought, she'd begun to half walk, half drift down the hillside and now he got up and went after her. "If it's really a dream," he

said, “that would mean you could do anything you wanted, right?”

“Sure, I suppose.”

He smiled triumphantly. “Then fly. Just up and fly away – this hill would make an excellent lift off point, wouldn’t you say?”

She giggled. “It would, wouldn’t it? But why do you want me to fly away? I can tell you like me. Besides, I like talking to you, it’s interesting. I’ve never talked to a dream like this before.”

“I’m really not a dream, I swear. I’m thinking right now, I’m a real person.”

She chuckled, and then, seeing his expression, the smile faded from her face. Her eyes held a look of amazement. “You really believe it, don’t you?” she breathed. Then, almost too quiet for him to hear, “Maybe it’s better that way, for you.”

Dale found he was getting frustrated despite himself. *Just humour her,* he thought. *You’re supposed to humour these people to stop them flipping out*. It was easier said than done: he felt a strange, irresistible need to defend himself, to prove his own reality. He looked around the serene park, the sun beaming in a perfect, cloudless sky, and a bizarre thought assaulted his thoughts. *This day really does seem like a dream. I could almost fall asleep, right here.*

“Why should I have to prove myself, anyway?” he demanded. “I know I’m real. If anything, it should be you who proves to me that you’re dreaming. To be honest, Miss Daisy Dreamer, I have yet to see you do that.”

She laughed with genuine delight and clapped her hands. “Daisy Dreamer! I like that. You’re kind of a charmer, Dreamy Dale.” She laughed again and looked around, as if looking for someone to share the joke. *Maybe she’s just high*, he thought.

She looked at him uncertainly, weighing his suggestion, and then nodded. “I accept.” She stated.

“You accept…what?”

“I will prove to you that this is all a dream, and if I do… then we can *both* fly away together! If I don’t… well, I’ll do whatever you want, because that, Mr. Dreamy Dale, is how certain I am. Is it a deal?” She stuck out her hand.

He shook it, and couldn’t keep a grin off his face. “I’ll hold you to that, Daisy Dreamer. Go right ahead.”

“Alright then! Now, let’s see… I shall achieve this with…” she looked around. There was a shovel sticking out of a flowerbed nearby, probably abandoned by whoever’s job it was to take care of the gardening in this place. “Nothing more than that shovel over there!”

Before he could say a word, she ran over to the shovel and wrenched it from the ground, sending roses and clumps of soil everywhere, including all over her. A laugh escaped his lips at sight of her; dirty, a triumphant expression playing across her face. He glanced uncomfortably at a young woman and her little boy strolling up the path towards them, wondering what they’d think of this strange couple in the park. The boy was sucking on two scoops of a vile looking pink ice cream, and seemed disinterested, but the mother gave them a cursory glance as she went on her way.

“Watch this!” Daisy announced, her eyes full of a mischievous glee. *Oh*, he thought, *my kingdom for an ounce of sanity in her. If only...* She began to stride towards the mother and son, shovel in hand.

He watched her go for a moment, a stupid half smile stuck on his face. As she drew close enough for them to notice her, to turn and wave a nervous hello, he felt the first stirrings of concern. *She thinks this is all a dream*, he thought dumbly. *She thinks it’s all a dream, and they’re part of it.*

As she came nearer, the mother must have sensed something was wrong; perhaps from the odd gleam in Daisy’s eyes, or the way she came towards them with such quick, aggressive steps. She pushed her son behind her hard enough for him to lose one of his scoops, and he let out an indignant yelp.

Dale saw her draw back the shovel. He reacted too late, springing towards her from too far away. Now he really did feel like he was in a dream; his feet dragging on the ends of his legs like they were chained to hundred kilo barbells, his lungs trying to scream through a mouthful of superglue. He watched it all unfold in slow motion, and saw his reflection in every drop of glistening blood as it floated through the air.

She swung the shovel into the side of the woman’s head, sending her to her knees. Then she lined up and took her head with the edge of it, like a batter knocking the ball off a tee. The mother’s head flew high into the air and dropped, still screaming, behind a bush. Blood and bone shards flew in several directions. The boy cowered away from the blows, but Dale could tell that, like him, he was in total shock.

She lifted the shovel above her head again, and now the reality of it must've hit the child at last, because he dropped his ice cream and turned to run. It was too late.

The flat of the shovel hit him on the top of his head, and his skull shattered like an egg under a heavy spoon. It seemed to flatten on top, and then cave in as she followed through. For a second it seemed as though his legs were trying to run on, but then they collapsed under the weight of his body, and he was down for good.

Dale skidded to a stop less than ten feet away, just staring at the carnage. All around him, the day continued to shine: the birds twittered cheerily and the trees swayed in the gentle breeze.

She turned, slowly, her blood splattered face grinning at him. His stomach churned and he felt weak at the knees, but he stayed on his feet, somehow. Had he done this? Was he responsible?

"You…"

"See? I could never have done that if it wasn't a dream. I mean, that kid's head, like, exploded! Did you see that? His brain made it all the way to the *bench*!"

He looked at the broken body of the little boy and a choked sob escaped him. He stumbled over to the two corpses and knelt. The mother was surely dead, but he put his fingers to the boy's pulse, just in case. There was nothing at all. Their blood was already forming a fast running river down the pathway towards the city. He stared at it, amazed that there could be so much.

"You killed… They're dead." His words were a harsh whisper.

She looked truly worried for the first time, and she dropped the shovel and knelt beside him. "I'm so sorry!" she said. "I didn't mean to really scare you like that! I just thought, you know, it'd prove my point. I have a really sick sense of humour."

"Why didn't you just fly?!" He shouted. "Just fly away, you goddam psycho! If you're in a dream just fly away! Fly away, you nutcase! Look what you've done!"

She stood up, backing away from him, but he went after her and shook her, hard. "They're dead because of you! Can't you see, you're not in a dream! This is not a dream! Can't you taste the air? Look at the sun!" He pinched her, hard, and she recoiled. "Feel that? Is it a dream now?"

She was crying, tears streaming down her face, and she stared at her shoes. He was dimly aware of the silence that had fallen over the park. When was he going to hear sirens, he wondered? Surely someone would have seen that in broad daylight - especially with the amount of blood. There was so much now, it seemed impossible.

"You're right,' it's not a dream," she said, between sobs.

Thank God, he thought. *She's finally seeing it. It's finally getting through.*

Her eyes lifted slowly off the ground to meet his and said, "It's a nightmare."

He pushed her away, horrified. "Help!" he called, looking around for someone, anyone at all. He wondered how it had gotten dark so quickly. The moon had already risen, but he could have sworn it was midday just a minute ago. He turned back to her and saw that she was also looking up at the sky, confused.

"Hey! Don't you move, alright? I'm going to get some help for these…" But when he looked at the pathway he saw the people were gone, and there was only blood. It was everywhere now, soaked so deep into the grass that the park became a crimson swamp. He saw dark capillaries spreading through the streets in the city far below.

"What's going on?" Suddenly he was very, very afraid. "When did it get so dark?"

She wiped the tears from her eyes, and he thought he saw something like relief on her face. He couldn't be sure, because by now it had become so dark he could barely see her at all.

"I think I'm waking up," she said.

"What? No! NO! Don't you go anywhere! Don't go! You killed them, you…" But the blackness was closing in from all sides now, and even the moon and the stars began vanishing from sight. He felt like he was going blind.

"Wait! Stop! Come back, please! Go back to sleep, come back to sleep! Can't you see I'm dying! Help me, I'm sorry! Daisy! Daisy!"

But she was already drifting away from him, nothing but a white dress fading into the darkness. Before she disappeared altogether, he saw her lie back on something and close her eyes, as if she was going to sleep.

After that, the black closed in, and then Dale Cartwright was no more...

Ben Pienaar

was born in South Africa and moved to Australia in 2000, where he lives and, more importantly, writes his days away. He also works two jobs to finance his crippling addiction to coffee, and spends his free time reading until his eyes hurt. After countless submissions, he got four stories published, ‘Beyond,’ ‘Dreamer,’ ‘Fair Trade,’ and ‘Till Death.’ The rest of his stories can be found on www.freenightmares.wordpress.com. His dream is to one day make grown men shiver with fear and traumatize small children. He writes obsessively, in the hopes that if can only pass his nightmares on to others, they might leave him alone.

Mr. Creator

Joe McKinney

"Well," said Miles Fesler, my new landlord. "This is it. Fifty dollars a month. Just like we discussed."

He was an obscenely fat, grizzled man in his late fifties with a broad, red face and eyes that reminded me of jaundice; a sickly yellow. We'd walked up three flights of stairs to get to the apartment and it had left him winded. He wheezed wetly while he talked.

I glanced around at my new accommodations and sighed. The room was a depressingly small box with two yellowed windows on the north wall. I went over to them and looked out at Cattleman's Square, a rectangular field of poorly manicured grass formed by the tenement that gave the area its name. Public housing shouldered up against the Square on three sides, and I could hear the delighted screams of children, squawking mothers, and the not so distant traffic noises of the city at twilight.

The San Antonio skyline loomed beyond the apartments, and the sky was a charcoal smear of black, foul smog against a rust-colored sunset. It was strangely beautiful, not without a certain romantic charm, but as I turned back to the apartment I had to admit that there was little romance to poverty when seen from close up.

The wood floor was badly scuffed, the plaster on the walls was flaking off in great, leprous chunks, and there were several suspicious stains. A fine patina of dust covered everything and a large brown cockroach stared up at me brazenly from a corner near the back wall. The only light came from a naked bulb hanging by a string in the center of the room.

"There's no bathroom," I said, wrinkling my nose at the lingering odor of mold that seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Fesler wiped the sweat from the back of his hairy neck with a gray snot rag. "Yeah," he said, still wheezing. "The best thing for that is a bucket."

I gawked at him. "A bucket?"

He nodded without a trace of apology. "That's what the other tenants do. I own the hardware store down on the first floor. If you want I can sell

you one."

I studied the man, trying to find some indication that he was joking, but apparently he wasn't.

"You are getting the place cheap," he said.

Yeah, cheap, I thought. I had exactly $371.14 in my pocket, which in my estimation made the word cheap dangerously suggestive.

But I didn't have any other choice. I'd thoroughly wrecked a marriage, lost a job, and alienated my two teenage sons. This was rock bottom, and it was either build myself back up from here or die in the dust with the roaches.

And I still had a little will to live.

I put my painting supplies down in the middle of the room, and with the air of a man accepting a lengthy prison sentence, said, "Fine. I'll take it."

Fesler nodded. I don't think he doubted that I'd say anything else.

"Are my neighbors quiet?" I asked. "I like quiet."

"You've only got the one on this floor," he said. "His name's Wesley Suffles. Good man. Folks around the Square think the world of him." Fesler suddenly smiled brightly, an unsettling, black-toothed gesture that made my stomach turn. "Say, I bet the two of you'll get on like a house on fire. He's a writer. Same as you."

"I'm a painter," I said patiently. "I do portraits, mostly."

"Even better," he said. He clapped his hands together and waddled toward the door. "Rent's due first of the month. Come see me about the bucket if that's what you decide to do."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll do that."

***

Two hours later, after the sun went down and the sounds of playing children were gone from the Square, I went down to Fesler's hardware store and did just that. I also bought an ice chest – another of his recommendations. With two dollars' worth of ice I could keep my food in it for four or five days without rotting.

On the way back from the convenience store on the corner, as I was climbing the stairs up to the third landing, I met my neighbor, Wesley

Suffles.

I recalled Fesler's words, that everybody in the Square thought the world of Suffles, though as I stared up at him, I strained at the hyperbole. He was at the top of the stairs, completely naked save for his gym socks, waving a bottle of tequila around with one hand and a ball point pen with the other, like some parody of a concert conductor.

He was so fat that his gut, which was covered by coarse gray hair, hung over his genitalia, and for a moment I wondered if they even existed. His skin, where it wasn't hairy, was a pale road map of blue veins, and his doughy face was lit red with intoxication.

"Hello," I said, because nothing else seemed to answer to the situation.

Suffles blinked at me.

"I'm your new neighbor across the hall," I said.

"I know who you are," he said. His words were wet and slurred, like his tongue was too big for his mouth. "You're William Barton."

"That's right. I guess Mr. Fesler told you… "

"What are you doing here?"

I tried to smile. "Excuse me?"

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. He looked confused, angry. "What are you doing here? Here? You're supposed to be in St. Louis murdering your wife."

The smile drained from my face and a tight-lipped scowl took its place. I *was* from St. Louis. It was true that I hated my wife so much so I'd had to get away from her. And, yes, I'd even had fantasies about killing her. But of course I'd told no one about *that*. No one knew me in San Antonio. I was just a name on a lease in a rattrap apartment.

"You're drunk," I said.

"That's true," Suffles said, swaying dangerously on the top stair. "But you haven't told me what you're doing here. How can you be here?"

"We'll talk another time," I said stiffly. "When you're more...put together."

I walked up the stairs, past Suffles, who stared after me, seemingly unaware of his own nakedness.

I glanced back at him as I fumbled the key into the lock and then hurriedly went inside. With my back to the door, I listened for movement

out on the landing, praying for the man to go away.

When at last he wandered off, I went to my painting supplies and set up a canvas. I had brought a mirror with me, but it had cracked on the bus ride down from St. Louis, so that now it looked like a car's windshield that's been hit with a brick.

Still, I thought, as I looked into my shattered reflection, it suits me.

And I began my first painting, a self-portrait.

***

I spent the next two weeks working on my sketchbook. Facial studies, mostly. I couldn't afford a live model, so I had to settle for taking mental snapshots of the people I met in the Square. Whenever I found an interesting subject, I'd quickly transfer his or her likeness to the sketchbook and then over the next few days I'd rework the original likeness into a portrait worth putting onto a canvas. It was a slow process, but I had plenty of time on my hands.

I enjoyed my work. For the first time in years, I was actually enjoying myself, and I can't tell you how liberating that felt. I was…well, I was free. I can't think of another way to describe it. It was glorious.

My only complaint was the shoddy quality of my surroundings. Oh, I don't mean the dirtiness of it. No, that I expected, especially considering what I was paying for it. What got to me was the constant noise I heard from Wesley Suffles' apartment. It was a scratching noise, a steady, unnaturally loud, pen on paper sound. You wouldn't think I'd be able to hear something like that through the wall – from a completely different apartment at that – but there it was just the same.

Constant.

Steady.

Scratch, scratch, …scratch.

In the beginning, I dismissed it as an echo of my frayed nerves. So many people had picked and pulled on me for so many years, everybody wanting something, some quick piece of my time, that I almost felt I had ceased to exist. Me time had disappeared from my life.

Then I thought, *Brain tumor*. People with brain tumors hallucinate, don't they? See birds at the foot of their bed. Think the carpet they're

walking on is beach sand.

And then I thought, *well, if it is a brain tumor, I guess I'm screwed. I don't have the money to do anything about it anyway, so just go on with life such as it is*.

Ignore the scratching if you can.

And so I threw myself into my painting, and to my surprise, I enjoyed myself.

One day, as I was wandering the Square, I happened to see a young mother and her two sons. The older boy looked about five, the younger maybe three. The mother was busily shepherding the boys down the front stairs of one of the tenements, telling them over and over again that they'd miss it if they didn't hurry.

Though I was intrigued by what *it* was, I was more interested in their faces. The young woman had a black eye, the left one. Her shiny black hair was thick, but crudely styled, and fell about her face in clumps. She wasn't especially slender, but she was attractive, despite the black eye and the beleaguered look of worry that haunted her features.

It didn't seem to me that she was running from someone, as the black eye might have otherwise suggested, but rather that she was worried about some other, less tangible, problem. Perhaps it was a lack of money, I thought. Maybe there was another child on the way. Either one, or neither one, was a possibility. She was just one of those people who begged to be explored, layer by layer.

But the thing that thrilled me most, as an artist, was the contrast between her perpetual worry and world-weariness on the one hand and the look of wide-eyed naive wonder on her children's faces. The contrast was striking, even profound.

I wanted very much to paint them, and so I followed them.

I soon found out what *it* was. A parade was marching down Commerce Street, one of the major downtown thoroughfares just a few blocks from the Square.

The boys chattered happily. Their mother fretted over them, trying her best to keep her brood clutched around the hem of her skirt. They took up a spot on a street corner and the boys climbed up on a green metal lamppost so they could have a better look.

From where I sat on a bus stop bench across the street I had a perfect view of them, and I began to draw.

Soon the parade arrived; pretty girls in prom dresses waving to the crowd from the rumble seats of old-timey cars; marching bands; Shriners in go-carts; black men on horseback dressed up as Buffalo Soldiers. The boys were delighted, and I drew at a frantic pace, trying to put it all down on paper.

The crowd pressed closer to the street, their mouths open and a gasp on their lips as a man on a ten-foot high unicycle rode by, juggling flaming torches.

Somebody pressed up against me, and his thigh bumped my elbow, sending my pencil scratching across the page where I'd nearly finished drawing the mother's face.

"Hey," I said. "Watch it, buddy."

But when the man looked down at me, my mouth went dry and I couldn't breathe.

He had no face, no features whatsoever.

I gasped for air and stumbled to my feet. The man seemed unaffected by my fear, oblivious to it, and as my mouth worked desperately to say something he turned away and melted back into the crowd.

Only then did I notice the other people in the crowd, for all of them were strangely out of focus. The people nearest me had dark pits for eyes and an unformed hump for a nose and a red slash for a mouth, but beyond them, in the ranks of spectators in the background, the faces became less and less distinct, the features disappearing entirely. It was like looking at a photograph of a large crowd, a seething mass of humanity that became blurrier as the perspective lengthened. To my horror, I realized the indistinguishable props that made up that photograph surrounded me.

Panic overwhelmed me.

I think I screamed.

I dropped my sketchbook on the sidewalk and stumbled out into the street and right into the middle of the trumpet section of a marching band.

Their music became a jumble of ruined notes, and cries of protest mixed with jeers of laughter rose up from the crowd. I couldn't process any of that, though. I was too frightened, too rattled, to register the confusion I was creating.

Suddenly a pair of hands grasped me roughly by my collar and spun me around. I found myself facing a barrel-chested policeman, whose great bulk was easy enough to see, but whose face was a blurred shifting of half-discernible features.

"What the hell's your problem?" he demanded. His voice sounded like a tape cassette being eaten by a tape player.

I fumbled for words, but couldn't say them.

"Are you drunk?" he croaked.

"No," I managed. I couldn't meet his melting eyes. His mouth drifted from one side of his chin to the other.

He picked me up and dragged me through the crowd, which spread open for us like a zipper.

The next thing I knew, I was being thrown into a garbage heap.

"Get lost," the garble-voiced policeman said. "I see you again, I'll take your ass to jail."

I dragged my aching carcass into an alley and climbed to my feet. Blinded by confusion and half mad with fear, I ran back to the Square and headed up the stairs for the safety of my apartment.

***

There was that scratching again.

It grew louder the closer I got to the third floor landing. It seemed to come from Suffles' apartment and from inside my head at the same time. I don't really know how to describe it, except to say that it was weird, and wrong, and so persistent and emotionally painful that it almost made me cry.

Wesley Suffles came out of his apartment as I was climbing the last few stairs to the third floor landing.

"Hello," he said happily. He was fully clothed, and appeared to be sober.

"Hello," I answered, trying to sound cool, but still with desperation in my voice, and probably in my eyes. Standing there, I was aware of the garbage smell that still lingered on my clothes.

Perhaps he thought I was afraid of him, because his voice was oddly gentle, almost parental. "Listen," he said, "I'm sorry about the other night. I

realize now that I must have seemed out of my head."

"Perfectly all right," I said, fumbling through my pockets for my keys.

All I wanted to do was get inside and forget about the weirdness I'd seen at the parade, but he wouldn't let me go that easily. He followed me to my door and said, "It's just that it caught me by surprise, you know? Seeing you here?"

Something about the way he said it unsettled me. Was I supposed to know him or something? "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Well, surely you can imagine my surprise. It's not the kind of thing that happens every day, you know. I mean, wouldn't it rattle you if the subject of one of your paintings suddenly stepped off the canvas and struck up a conversation with you?"

*The man must sniff glu*e, I thought.

"Mr. Suffles," I asked. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"You really don't know?" he said, his expression incredulous. He tried to smile.

"Know what?"

"Who you are, man! Who I am!"

"I think," I said, "that we ought to say good day."

I threw the bolt with my key.

"Please don't go," he said. "This must scare you horribly. I'm sorry. I didn't intend to."

"What is it, exactly, you t*hink* scares me, Mr. Suffles?"

"Why, meeting me, of course. The man who created you. The man who wrote you into being."

I blinked. In my mind, I saw Suffles' status drop from alarmingly insane to pitiable and foolish.

"I'm turning in for a nap," I said.

"I know you," Suffles said urgently, desperate that I believe him. "I know you better than anyone. Better even than you know yourself."

It sounded like a challenge.

"You do, eh? What do you think you know, Mr. Suffles?"

“Okay,” he said, smiling, eyes darting back and forth, like he was trying to find his place in a script only he could read. “Okay. Remember that skinny little Hispanic girl in your office back in St. Louis?” He winked at me obscenely. “The one with the killer ass? You remember her, don’t you? She wore that tight little yellow skirt her first day. Her little black thong was showing over the top of her skirt every time she sat down. After you saw that you went back to your office and spent the rest of the day with your hand in your pocket, rubbing your cock.

Remember that?”

“And remember that day you came home and your wife told you she was pregnant with your oldest boy? How about that one, eh? You ran out of the house and went to that little bar with the palm trees out front. The front looked like a wrecked boat.

Remember that? You got drunk and tried to think of a way to tell her to get an abortion because you didn’t think you could handle it and you hated yourself because of how weak you thought you were. Remember staying out all night? Remember waking up in your car the next morning? The jerk in the car behind you blowin’ his horn ‘cause the light had changed and you didn’t know it? And remember how – ”

“Stop it!” I yelled. The horror I had felt at the parade was flooding back into me, harder than ever. “Stop it. You don’t know me.”

“William, think about it,” he said. “Don’t I know you? Aren’t you asking yourself how I know what I know right now?”

“You’re insane,” I said, though at that moment I felt much less sure of my own grip on reality than of his. What he was saying…it was impossible. But it was all true. Every word of it. All those things had really happened.

“You are the finest character I’ve ever written,” he said. “I’ve written thousands of them, William. I filled Cattleman’s Square with their stories, their lives. But of all the characters, you William, you are my favorite.”

“You mean…all of this?” I said, and waved my hand vaguely in the air. “All of this is in your head?”

I felt seasick.

“That’s right,” he said enthusiastically. “You understand.”

“No,” I said.

He was completely unperturbed by my denial.

“I did something for you I’ve never done before or since, William. I gave you free will. I gave you the greatest gift I had to give.”

“Stop it,” I said.

“Don’t you see, William?” he said. He took a few steps towards me, his hand stretched out before him lovingly, like a father to a son. “That’s why I was surprised to see you here. I wrote a story for you, what I thought would be your last. But you were more than that. You demanded to be more. You jumped right off the page.”

I shook my head desperately, denial pulsing in me like a wild heartbeat.

“You’re more than I gave you credit for,” Suffles said. “It restored me, waking up to that realization. And I’m writing more stories for you now, too.” He was breathless, excited. “I’ve heard you’ve taken up painting. That makes me happy. I’ve written success into your story now. Just you wait. Good things are gonna start happening for you.”

I was shaking with rage, with denial, with fear. I tried to speak but couldn’t. My mouth was working like I was chewing gum, and I still couldn’t answer.

Suffles put out his hand again, inviting me to take it.

God help me, I actually came close to doing it.

But I didn’t. Instead, I stared at his offered hand, then closed my eyes. Without saying another word I turned the doorknob to my apartment and went inside.

***

Late the next evening, I was sitting on the floor in the corner of my apartment, my hands over my ears, trying to shut out the noise of that pen and it’s infernal scratching.

There was a knock at my door. I hesitantly opened it to reveal a spindly, skinny, white-haired little old woman in her early seventies. She was dressed all in purple – purple slacks, purple short-waisted sport coat, a light purple silk blouse with frills down the front. Evener low-heeled shoes were purple. She had webs of purple veins showing through the skin on the backs of her hands, matching the ensemble.

She was holding my sketchbook under her arm.

“William Barton?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yes?”

She held the sketchbook out to me with both hands. “I believe this is yours,” she said.

I looked at it, then took it from her. “Thanks.”

She smiled, but didn’t leave. We stared at each other.

“Um,” she said.

“Yes?”

“This is rather awkward. I found that in the street. After the parade?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I hope you don’t take offense, Mr. Barton, but I looked through your work.”

“Oh?”

“They’re very good,” she added abruptly.

“Oh. Thank you.”

“I don’t suppose,” she said, wringing her hands with obvious unease. “That you’re a painter?”

I told her that I was.

“My name is Gloria Hearns,” she said. “By any chance, have you ever heard of me?”

“I’m afraid not, Ms. Hearns,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Gloria, please,” she said. She handed me her card.

Gloria Hearns
Blue Star Art Gallery
414 Pioneer Way
San Antonio, Texas

“Blue Star?” I asked.

“That’s my gallery,” she said. “It’s the largest in South Texas.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled gracefully. “In a way, it’s lucky for both of us that I found your sketches.”

“Oh? How’s that?”

“Well,” she said, “I think we can help each other out.” She glanced around the landing with distaste. She was obviously not one who appreciated poverty. “May I come in?”

“Oh,” I said, remembering my manners. They’d sort of slipped out of daily use. “Sure. Come in.”

I stepped aside and she came in, her face a mixture of horrified repugnance at the mess, which was considerable, and fascinated surprise at the few paintings she could see.

She went right for my self-portrait, the one of me in the shattered mirror.

“My God,” she said. “I knew it. I knew I was doing the right thing by coming here.”

She turned to me and said, “Mr. Barton, I just knew this was a good idea. How would you like to exhibit your paintings in my gallery? A small run at first, maybe ten paintings. But after that...” She spread her arms expressively.

I was speechless.

“I could even offer you an advance,” she said. “Would three thousand be okay? That would only be an advance, of course. Any of the paintings I see here could easily fetch three or four times that.”

I still had my hand on the doorknob when she said that, and the door was still open. From across the landing I heard Suffles’ door open, and I happened to glance that way as I was closing the door.

Our eyes met, Suffles and mine.

He smiled, nodding enthusiastically. He even gave me a ridiculous thumbs up gesture. Right on! That a boy! I had been on the verge of joy, but seeing Suffles, and seeing him give me that sign, brought back the weirdness of our last conversation, and my expression soured.

“Mr. Barton?” Gloria Hearns said. She looked concerned; like she was afraid she’d offended me or something.

“Three thousand is a very good rate for a new artist,” she said. “I assure you of that. With your talent, of course, and a show or two under your belt, you’ll soon be able to demand much more. And you keep the money you make from the sale of your exhibits. Minus twelve percent for the gallery, of course.”

“Of course,” I said, and closed the door.

Funny, how you can think volumes in only a moment.

As I stood there, suddenly aware that I was holding my sketchbook, I thought back on everything Wesley Suffles had told me. I thought back on his ridiculous claim that he was my creator, my God, my Frankenstein, but rather than laugh, I had to fight an inward struggle to keep my knees from buckling.

Was it really possible? Surely not…

But yet, he hadn't misspoken a single word. That time he told me that laundry list of things he knew about me, all of them were true, and there was absolutely no way that anyone outside my own head could have known them all. And there was my own strange behavior, the day the Greyhound bus I'd taken from St. Louis had stopped in San Antonio for a two-hour layover. My ticket had been for Mexico. My intention was to lose myself on some Iguana-crowded beach and slowly self-destruct like a character in a Tennessee Williams play. But when I saw San Antonio, when I smelled its air and heard its sounds, something about it pulled at my gut like I was circling a black hole. I stepped off the bus, and with my head a twisted wreck of conflicting fears, I walked until I landed in Cattlemen's Square. It was like coming home, and the feeling was so powerful, so undeniable, that I just stayed. I also thought of the parade, and the melting faces in the crowd.

They were unfinished somehow, not completely realized, and that's when it hit me. All of Cattlemen's Square was a figment of Wesley Suffles' imagination. When I looked out my window, what I saw was a picture of his mind. Everything there was his creation, and as such, had only the depth, the texture, the history, that he had written for it. Those faces in the crowd were incomplete, not because there was some defect on their part, but because they were what Suffles needed for his fiction, a crowd, and nothing more.

It all fit, and I couldn't deny it any longer.

Then there was that sound, that constant scratching of his pen on paper.

I thought of the refrain from Poe's masterpiece, "The Tell-Tale Heart." It's the beating of his hideous heart. That's what it is, the beating of his hideous heart.

“Mr. Barton?” Gloria Hearns said, her voice betraying an edge of fear. Could she see the hatred in my eyes, I wondered.

“Ms. Hearns,” I said, and laughed out loud when she straightened herself up and tried to look like she hadn’t just seen the devil in my eyes. “Ms. Hearns, who sent you here?”

Her mouth, her old woman lips, quivered. “What do you mean?”

“You know you’re a pawn, don’t you?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said indignantly. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“How much background did he write for you, Ms. Hearns? I’ve always heard an author should know more about his characters than he puts on the page. How deep did he go with you?”

I started to advance on her, and she, in sudden terror, backed up against the wall.

“Where did you go to high school, Ms. Hearns?”

“What? Mr. Barton, what – ”

“Who was the first boy you kissed? What was his name?”

“I – ”

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Mr. Barton, please.”

I had her there, I knew it. Had her figured out.

One of my paintbrushes was on the table next to the door, a heavy gauge #6 with a thick wooden handle, and I picked it up like a knife.

“You know what really pisses me off?” I asked her.

She shook her head. Her whole body trembled.

“Not so much that my history has been rendered meaningless. That’s not what pisses me off. I mean, hell, I gave that up voluntarily. No, what really pisses me off is that my future has been taken from me too.”

I smiled at her, wickedly.

“I mean, look at it from my perspective. How can I be truly successful if I don’t earn it? You see what I mean?”

She shook her head again, violently now.

“No,” I said. “Of course you don’t. You don’t need that understanding to function in the role he made for you. The problem is though, I’ve got that

understanding. I've got it up to my freakin' ears. I know it's not my talent that brought you here. It was him. *He* wrote you into my life."

The poor thing looked like she was going to rattle herself to pieces.

"I don't blame *you*, Ms. Hearns. Don't think that. I know this isn't your fault. You didn't ask for this."

I walked towards her and she put up her hands like she actually had a snowball's chance of stopping me.

It was sad in a way.

***

Several hours later, my apartment was dripping with her blood. The floor was covered, as were most of the walls. I even managed to get wet little chunky bits of her on the ceiling. It was exhilarating, and when it was finally over, I fell back onto my butt and looked at my trembling hands.

Drunk with the joy that I was finally taking control of my circumstances, I threw open my door and walked out onto the landing like a man who has just been saved.

Wesley Suffles was coming up the stairs, a bag of groceries in his hands.

"William," he said. He had that patronizing paternal smile on his face. But then he saw the blood on my hands. "William?"

He dropped his groceries and ran up the stairs. "William?" He grabbed my hands and turned them over in his while I laughed out loud.

Our eyes met.

He looked past me, through the open door to my apartment, and saw a glimpse of the scene inside.

He nearly puked.

"Oh my God," he said, his hand cupped over his mouth. "William, what have you done?"

I laughed at him, and when he walked into my apartment, I laughed at his back.

He came back out to the landing and closed my door behind him. The effort he made to stay calm was impressive.

"William," he said, pulling me away from the stairs. "My God, why did you do it? She was going to help you. She was going to make you a

star."

He took a moment to look over the railing, to make sure we weren't overheard, and then said, "Okay, I can fix this. I can get you out of this. Let's see, I'll need a gangster. No, wait – Ah! I've got it. Come on." He pulled me towards his apartment. "I'm going to write a story for you that'll get you out of this."

He opened his door and we went inside. The apartment was almost completely bare of furnishings. There was no dresser, no coffee table. His bed was an old, yellowed mattress in the corner with a moth-eaten blanket over it. The only other piece of furniture was a plain wooden desk and a plain wooden chair in the middle of the room.

Handwritten manuscripts were piled everywhere. In some places, you couldn't even see the wall. There were mountains upon mountains of manila folders stuffed with loose-leaf notebook paper, and every single page was crammed with a tight, surprisingly neat handwriting that contained all the lives of Cattleman's Square.

I didn't consciously look for my stories – at least not at first. Only after a few minutes of digging through the papers, listening to the steady scratching of Suffles' black ballpoint pen on the pages at his desk, did I realize what I was looking for. Once I knew what I wanted though, my search became desperate.

Suffles' apartment had two north-facing windows, just like mine, and they were open. A cool breeze drifted into the apartment, carrying with it the sound of a crowd gathering in the Square and the sound of workmen hastily hammering something together. But I ignored all that. I had a mission, a need to know the truth, and I dug for it until, at last, I found a pile of yellowed papers in a far corner, stacked waist-high from the floor.

My name was printed in bold letters on the top page, and it was with a hitch in my chest that I removed it.

My life was there, reduced to fiction. I read in horror as one by one the milestones of my life replayed on the page. Here was the time when I was eleven, when my older brother Russell drowned. Here was the first tit I ever cupped in my hand. It belonged to a fat, acne-scarred girl who gave it to me during a game of spin the bottle. I found my first car; my first love; my first heartache; my sons; the death of my father; my mother's stroke and subsequent senility; my wife; my divorce; my every glaring, ugly fault.

I sat on the floor and covered my face with my hands. “Why did I have to be like this?” I pleaded…

The pen scratching stopped. “What did you say?”

“Why?” I asked him. “Why did I have to be this way?”

“William – ”

“You gave me bad knees and bad eyesight and an ugly temper. You made me ugly and petty and worthless. You’re a mean, sadistic son of a bitch, you know that? You could have made me beautiful. You could have made me skinny. You could have made my sons respect me and my wife love me. But you didn’t do any of those things. You made me as mean and petty and weak as you are. Why? What possible reason could you have for being so cruel?”

“William,” he said, “stop it, please.”

But I didn’t want to stop it. I charged him, and when I put my hands on him, I began to flail with my fists until his nose was gushing blood and his lips were cracked open and pulpy, like smashed peaches.

He scrambled away from me in terror. His black ballpoint pen was on the desk and I snatched it. I stabbed at him with it, and when he crossed his arms over his face in a futile attempt to block me, I nailed the pen through his hand.

He screamed, then moaned. It was a low, horrible sound so pregnant with pain it seemed to shake the walls. I stared at the wound, and at him, and when he turned and ran, I followed him.

I chased him down the stairs and into the hardware store on the ground floor. He turned then, his face that of a scared animal, and I beat him again. I punched and kicked him until I was too tired to swing my fists anymore, and then I sat down near the front counter and watched him as he crawled down the aisle with the hammers and nails.

Renewed anger washed over me, and I got up and followed him, picking up a hammer as I closed in on him. “You can rewrite me, can’t you? You can start me over. Make me young?”

“No,” he said.

“No you can’t, or no you won’t?”

“No,” he said. His hands were in the air, the pen still sticking through the right one.

I took a swing at him with the hammer and it sent him into a frenzied panic to get away. His arms spun like pinwheels, and he landed on spools of chain and barbed wire, fell to the ground, and got up again.

"Stop!" he screamed.

But I didn't. I ran at him again, and he ran for the Square.

I stopped in the doorway.

There, in the middle of the Square, was a large crowd, and at the center of the crowd was a large wooden structure – a gallows.

Understanding hit me like a truck.

"Your story," I said to him. "I thought you said you were going to write me out of trouble. Is this what you meant? You were going to have me hanged."

"No," he said. "This isn't for you. It isn't."

You're lying. I can see it in every crease in your face.

There was no point in prolonging what had to be done. With everyone watching in horrified silence, I stalked after Wesley Suffles, cornered him near the base of the gallows, and bludgeoned him to death with the hammer.

There were perhaps three hundred witnesses to my crime, and not a single one raised a hand to stop me. Not even when I dropped the hammer on the ground next to Suffles' body. Not even when I pulled the ballpoint pen out of his hand. Not even when a black pall spread across the sky, blotting out the first delicate rays of the sunrise in the east and smothering the stars in the plum-colored sky.

Those idiots...they'll never know why the sun won't ever rise again, even though they were witnesses to the event. I pitied them for their ignorance, and I pitied myself because I knew the truth.

What a horrible, horrible thing it is to be set free.

***

So here I sit, writing the final lines in this nasty little tale, making my own nasty little scratching noises.

After I went back inside and closed the metal accordion grill across the entrance to the building, I had to struggle with my mind for direction. Every decision was like pulling my feet out of mud. But at last I decided on this...this...what? A confession? A history? What can I call this?

I suppose, really, that it doesn't matter. In a few moments I'll be dead, and this thing, this whatever it is, will be all that's left.

When I'm done with this, this thing that I've written with my creator's ballpoint pen, I'll stack the loose-leaf pages that it's written on and stash them under the loose floorboard in the corner of my apartment. But you know that, don't you? If you're reading this, you obviously found the loose board.

To you, whoever you are, please –

Ah! They're through the accordion grill I pulled across the door to the hardware store. Only moments left now.

If you find this, please, know that I'm not insane. I'm not. I almost wrote, *You've got to believe me*! But I figure, what's the point? I'm past the point where that matters. At least from my perspective. Perhaps it will matter to others. It doesn't to me.

Not anymore.

I merely wanted to silence the endless scratching of pen on paper, the beating of his hideous heart. But it seems that in the process of doing that, I've silenced my own hideous heart as well.

Joe McKinney

has been a patrol officer for the San Antonio Police Department, a homicide detective, a disaster mitigation specialist, a patrol commander, and a successful novelist. His books include the four part Dead World series, Quarantined, Inheritance, Lost Girl of the Lake, The Savage Dead, Crooked House and Dodging Bullets. His short fiction has been collected in The Red Empire and Other Stories and Dating in Dead World. In 2011, McKinney received the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel. For more information go to http://joemckinney.wordpress.com.

7 Hours

Max Booth III

The man who was no longer a man sat in his usual booth at the darkest corner of the bar, where no one would pay much attention to him. A glass of untouched wine rested on the table in front of him. He didn't drink the stuff personally, but ordered the same kind every evening, nonetheless. The aroma it delivered was pure bliss to his sensitive nostrils. He had come to accept a long time ago that this essence would be the closest he would ever get to Heaven.

He sat there in the dark, thinking: *seven hours*. Seven hours until everything changed. This would be his last night pretending to drink wine here. It would be his last night doing anything. In seven hours, he would know true peace.

Like every other night he went out, the glass of wine would remain completely full until after he was gone. It was a routine he had been practicing for years throughout bars and diners all over the country. Just like every other place, it was only a matter of time before the waitress grew suspicious and started with the questions. "Is the wine not to your liking?" It was inevitable. All across the country, there was always a curious waitress or bartender or clerk who caught on, and then it was time to pack up and leave. Except for this time. He wasn't going to move away and find a new bar to sit at. All of that was behind him. Tonight was all about change.

And later, when the detectives came around asking about missing persons, the waitress would undoubtedly remember the strange man who always sat for hours in the dark corner and ordered wine that he never drank. When they asked her what the man was doing all that time, what would she say?

"Watching," she would tell them. "Just watching…everyone." The cops would ask her if there was any other remarkable thing about him, and she would say, "Yeah, he's a great tipper."

But they'd surely inquire about his physical appearance. The man wondered how the waitress would describe him. Would she mention his smell?

There was, after all, a reason he tended to keep his distance. Because sometimes, when someone looked and smelled the way he did, the police

were called. Sometimes, one might be mistaken for a homeless alcoholic—or an escaped mental patient. Perhaps both.

He sat in his booth and watched the people come and go. He liked to study their behavior and eavesdrop on their conversations. He was intrigued. Here they were, celebrating office promotions and newborn babies, or feeding their sorrow and depression with a double shot of whiskey; doing it all in front of him as he watched. People came, they got drunk, they talked, and some went home with others.

Once, he followed one of those drunken couples back home to see what exactly it was that they did. He hid in the bushes and watched them through a bedroom window. He watched as they laughed and tore each other's clothing apart. It was the same act that his streetwalkers always performed, except these people called it "making love". Was there a difference, he wondered? He would return to this same window multiple times over the following months, trying to make sense of it all.

And, late one night after watching the drunken couple through the window again, he happened to encounter a whore lingering in a drug store parking lot. Before ending her life, he had asked her about making love; what it meant, why they did it, what its cause was. Her response had been a short-lived scream.

His mind was constantly plagued by questions. He knew nothing, yet felt that he should have known everything. All knowledge sat at the tip of his tongue, but never moved any further. No one was ever there to aid him in this abyss of the unknown. Concealed by darkness in bars was the closest he was able to get to humans without setting their radars off. And he had only met a couple of his own kind his entire life, however long this had lasted. It turned out they didn't know any more than he did.

Most of the ones he knew had long given up on trying to survive. After a while, there just wasn't a point to it. It had been over twenty years since the last time he encountered one of his kind. His name was Robert, and he'd found him on the street, just staring off into the night. They tried to talk, and it went okay at first, but it did not last. They had lived too long in their own heads to know what to say. Robert had killed himself the next day; just refused to go inside after the sun rose.

It was something the man who was no longer a man thought about more and more as the time went by. In fact, sitting there at the bar with his untouched glass of wine, that was all he was thinking about. He

remembered how Robert had said in the simplest tone that life no longer felt necessary to survive. Why continue to hunt when it came to no result? There was no real goal in sight—just crimson fuel to keep you searching for something that wasn't there. What was the purpose of wandering through the world when everything died except for you? He didn't want to know anymore. He just wanted to stop thinking about it. There would never be any answers.

A deep rumbling in his gut jolted him from his reverie. It'd been over six months since he had last fed and the hunger was starting to get to him. It was a bad idea being in a place with so many potential meals—but then again, at least in here his instincts would know better than to cause a scene, whereas outside in the dark, it would hold no mercy against the lonely stranger.

He dare not feed. The last meal he had endured was the whore he encountered outside the lovers' window. Tonight wasn't some heat-of-the-moment decision, but rather a plan that had been in formation for many years now. He thought it would be best if he were in his worst state when it finally happened. The unhealthier he was, the quicker it would be over and the less painful it would be. If he wanted to regroup with Robert in the big black nothing, then he would have had to prepare—and prepared he had. Just last week he'd left a chest of all his jewelry and antiques on the front door step of the lovers' house. He didn't need it anymore, and they had helped him occupy his time on many nights, so he figured they were owed at least that. It wasn't like he was going to miss any of it. By morning, he would have everything he could possibly want.

One hour had passed by in the bar before he finally stood up. There was forty-five minutes 'til closing time, and six hours until sunrise. If this was going to be his last night as . . . as *anything,* then he would need to find a suitable place to greet the new dawn. He pictured standing atop the tallest rooftop in the city; leaning right on the edge and letting the wind push him off just as the sun rose, turning him into a cloud of ash before even hitting the street below.

The man who was no longer a man started to head for the door across the bar, feeling people's eyes burning into the back of his head. He didn't even have to look at them to know that they all suspected what he was; they all knew he was different—he could practically smell their fear. Even with his disguise, he knew they saw straight through him. It wasn't a very good

disguise, anyway: green army jacket thrown over a gray hoodie; dirty blue jeans; white sneakers stained gray; a pair of sunglasses he always had on, protecting the public from seeing his eyes. He even kept a cigarette tucked between his ear for the sake of normality. People could relate with smoking, even if they never saw him light it up.

He wasn't even five feet from the door when he felt it.

It was like an anchor; a pain stabbed into the center of his cheek, and a strong force spun him around, as if he was a fish on a line. Though he was stronger than any mortal alive, this phantom hook proved to be a hundred times as strong. He had no choice but to oblige; to turn toward this invisible entity. And when he did, he saw where the hook and its devilish little string led.

About halfway across the room, a woman he had not noticed before sat alone at a table. Right away he felt a connection with her that he had not felt with someone in twenty years. It was like the two of them shared an electric jolt; stripping them both naked and exposing them for what they really were.

This can't be happening, he thought. And yet it was.

Without thinking, he approached the table. All previous thoughts of finding a tall rooftop were temporarily erased. He stood there, body trembling as he looked down at her. She was real. She was just as real as he was. He saw the bald scalp, her unnaturally pale skin. Despite the large-lensed sunglasses shielding her eyes, he knew she had no eyebrows. Though this kind of sight would give a small child—or anyone else for that matter—nightmares, but to him, she was beautiful.

He sat down across from her in silence. She didn't seem taken back by his forwardness; just watched him through her sunglasses, using her fork to play with the plate of spaghetti before her, 'though she never actually took a bite of it. In spite of their calm expressions, he felt they both could not be in a deeper state of shock.

The man was the first to speak, his voice trailing off. "Yeah… "

And then the woman. "Yeah."

"I didn't…, " There was no way to finish the sentence.

So she said a sentence of her own. "I've been looking for another a very long time."

"Same."

“What’s your name?” she asked. The fork dropped on her plate, making a loud clinging between them.

“I don’t know,” the man said. He sat there with his pale, bony hands folded together on the table, staring at her, trying to see through her shades. Even with his enhanced vision, he wasn’t able to. But he could imagine what they looked like; they would look exactly like his own. He knew that the black in her pupils had consumed the iris and sclera of each eye, leaving only an orb of ancient darkness.

“You don’t know?” the woman asked.

“I’ve forgotten.”

“How long have you—?”

“I don’t know that, either. It’s been a very long time.”

The woman leaned forward, interested. “Really? What’s the earliest thing you can remember?”

He did not have to stop and think; the memory was burned into the back of his brain like a cigarette ember—a scene that replayed again and again throughout his days.

“One night I opened my eyes and I was in darkness, buried in dirt,” he told her. He quickly looked around his shoulders, making sure no one was paying them any attention, and then trained his eyes back on her. “I clawed my way to the surface, found myself deep in a forest. A silver cross had been stuck into the earth on my grave. Apparently it was meant to keep me there.”

“I guess it didn’t work,” the woman said, smiling.

“I guess not.”

“What did you do after you woke up?”

He grabbed a napkin and started folding it into a miniscule square. “I wandered around for a while, until I found civilization again. I fed. I slept. I’ve traveled. It’s been like this forever. I’m sure you understand.”

She nodded, and a shadow cast itself over her face. “It’s not much of a life, is it?”

The man frowned. “It’s not much of anything. I don’t know what it is. All I know is that I’ve been…*what we are*, for a long time, even before I woke up in that grave. I don’t know how long I’ve been imprisoned here. I don’t know how I know *anything.* It is just an understanding I’ve come to terms with. But seeing you here on tonight—of all nights—it is not something I am going to question. I know what you are, and I know what I

am. We are the same. But you aren't like every other one of our kind I've encountered. You still possess some kind of…*life?* I don't know. Maybe that's why I feel like I can be so open to you right now, even though we've only just met. I can't even think of a time I've said more than a few words to *anyone* in two *decades*."

It took the woman a little while to answer. "You're the first one I've ever met," she said. "I saw you a little bit ago over there at the back, and I knew who you were right away. It's so strange, how long I've been searching…and here you finally are. I almost didn't believe it until you came over here."

The man nodded, and asked what her name was, feeling foolish for not asking sooner.

"Lori," the woman replied. "My name is Lori."

"And do you remember…?"

"Yeah," she said. "It's been about fifteen years now."

She's still just a baby, the man thought.

"Of how things were before?" he asked.

Her head tilted down, looking at the untouched pasta. "What about it?"

"What was it like?"

"A dream," she said. "A dream that was stolen from me."

He sat there a moment pondering the answer. "And what of the one who turned you?"

"I'm sure he's around," Lori said. "Somewhere in this godforsaken world."

"Did you have a family?"

"I had a son."

"What happened to him?" he pressed.

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about him."

The man nodded. He understood; some things were better left unsaid. Sometimes he felt a vague remembrance of a family of his own, but often dismissed it as disorientation. Much of his time centered around disorientation.

The lights in the bar were suddenly turned up bright, and the bartender called out: "Last call, folks!"

The man who was no longer a man looked at his watch. A little over five hours now. "Would you care to go for a walk with me?" he asked. They

were the last two customers in the building. Somehow, everyone else had slipped out without him noticing.

"Let's go," Lori said, and they left.

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The two of them left the bar, his arm slung naturally around her neck, blending into the night as they started to walk. They talked and talked. It felt cathartic to him to finally be able to converse with someone again. It amazed him how this minor privilege could have such an effect on his existence.

Words poured out of both of them like a fountain, and he felt they were so right together, as if they had always been meant to be, to talk to each other and be by each other's side. The man felt as if the woman could be his own family. They shared the same disease, the same hardships, and the same world . . . the same stigma.

"Would you like to see my home?" he suddenly blurted out.

"What?"

"My home. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes," she smiled, "that would be nice."

The man grew quite excited at the prospect of showing someone who was not an intended victim his home.

It wasn't a very long journey at all; only a few miles away from the bar. To get to it, they first had to squeeze through a sewer opening and then venture down a series of short, narrow tunnels. One of the tunnels broke away into a small room which the man had claimed for himself. There was not much here: a mattress, some candles, a few books scattered here and there. Everything else he had given to the two lovers.

Even though they could both see perfectly well in the darkness, the man still lit a couple of candles to brighten the room's gloomy tone. He sat down on the mattress and the woman joined him; her jaw resting on her folded up knees.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"Here?" he said. "About five years. Before, I moved around a lot. Not so much lately."

"It's a traveler's life, all right," Lori agreed. "A very lonely life."

"It is."

“You know, I’ve been searching for you for fifteen years now.”

He nodded. “I’ve been searching for someone like you, too. I am glad we’ve found each other.”

“Tell me,” she said, “what is the one thing you wish you could remember about being human? The most important thing that was taken from you?”

The man who was no longer a man looked at the wall and thought about it for a while. “Love,” he said. “I want to remember what love feels like.”

“Love?” She sat up, clearly startled by his answer.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sometimes, I watch these people through a window and they make love. They enjoy it so much. Have I done this? I don’t know. I want to know if I liked it as much as they seem to.”

“You mean sex,” she said.

“I guess.”

Lori sighed. “That’s what you’re the most curious about?”

“Yeah. It’s all I think about sometimes.”

She laughed. “You’re not so different from other men after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, just a joke,” she said. A moment passed, and she said, a little bitterly, “I still remember what sex feels like. Love, though? That’s just a myth. Trust me on that.”

“What did it feel like?” he asked.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she said, frowning. “It’s more spiritual than words can possibly convey. At least at first. But like everything else, you do it enough and it gets old real fast. And then it’s just something that you have to deal with. Like we deal with the night.”

“Oh.”

“Still, though, if things had gone differently, I would have made love with you,” she said.

“I’d have liked that,” the man said, lowering his head back and dwelling over the essentials of living that he could never experience.

“Here, lie with me awhile,” Lori prompted, and pulled him down next to her on the mattress, their sunglasses falling to the floor and revealing the darkness that absorbed their eyes. They curled together in a spoon position, his arm confusedly thrown over her. The man had lain on this same mattress countless times before, with his eyes closed, thinking about nothing in

particular. But he'd never lain here with someone next to him. This . . . this felt different.

"I like this," he whispered.

The woman did not respond and for a moment he thought she might have been crying, although that was ridiculous, as their kind were not able to produce tears. Sorrow was not a new feeling for him, but it still felt queer witnessing it in another.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Her reply arrived in a whisper quiet enough to soothe a mouse: "It's just—I've waited so long for this moment, to be here with you, to have you within reach… "

"I know," he said, remembering how he had felt each time he found another of his kind—how overwhelmed. And with this one, Lori, it was even stronger.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Me neither," he said, thinking of the rooftop that he had thought about climbing before the sun rose. It no longer seemed like something he'd want to do.

Their bodies melted together as one, lying there for another two hours without moving. It was the most profound silence the man who was no longer a man had ever experienced in his entire unknown length roaming this Earth. If he had it his way, he never would've moved another muscle again.

He thought about how if he were a real man then he would take care of her better in his arms. He thought how he would do what those two lovers did behind windows. And then he couldn't get the idea out of his mind again. It plagued him like a disease, and caused him to blurt out a sentence in mid-thought. "It is real, I think."

"What?" she asked, facing around to look at him.

"Love," he said. "I think you're wrong. I've seen people, they believe in it."

She sighed. "Give them enough time, see what they say then."

"I know that people pay for this love, too," he added. "But I don't understand if it's the same. I've tried talking to them before, these streetwalkers, but it's useless. They just scream. They are easy for hunting, at least. No one seems to ever miss them."

"Is that what you think?" Lori asked, her voice low and cold.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

Ten minutes passed before she spoke again: “I want to show you something.”

“Show me what?” he asked.

“It’s a secret,” she said.

He didn’t care; he was willing to travel to the other side of the planet with her.

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An hour passed and they were still walking. The urban landscape appeared only as background as they ventured into the hills around the city. There were only sixty minutes left until sunrise, but the man chose not to think about that. *Surely*, he thought, *she must know what she is doing.*

Then, out of nowhere, her voice returned: “Earlier you asked about my son.”

“Yes?” He tried walking faster, but she always seemed two steps quicker.

“He was nine years old,” Lori said. “Jesse, his name was Jesse. Never did know who his father was. It was just Jesse and me in the world, and that was the way it was supposed to always be.”

“Okay,” he said. He didn’t know where this was going, but it didn’t feel like it was good.

“He would stay in our trailer and watch cartoons while I…while I worked. And when… when I was bitten, I passed out, you know, woke up God knows when, just knew that it was very late. I stumbled back to our trailer feeling as if I was drunk. I didn’t know what to do; I just went inside and passed out on my couch. When I woke back up, it was much later, and Jesse was sitting next to me, coloring and watching TV.”

The man could already predict where this memory was heading, but he couldn’t think of any way to prevent her from continuing.

“My little boy…he never had a chance,” Lori said. “I wasn’t myself then, and I knew I would never be myself again. Something overtook me; some deep, insanely powerful hunger. Like a starved dog who suddenly discovers raw meat right in front of him. I know you know how it feels. You know damn well how it feels.”

“Yeah,” the man mumbled, resisting the urge to make her stop, talk her into returning back to his home in the sewers, where they could spoon together for the rest of eternity. He wanted that so badly. Just wanted to lie down with her one more time.

“Jesse was dead before I even realized what I was doing. Afterward, I tried the usual routine; I slit my wrists, but of course that did nothing. I tried pills and only puked them back up. And believe me, in the fifteen years of my affliction, I’ve made plenty more suicide attempts. I know what I am, and I know what I have to do. And I know that tonight is the night. It has always been tonight.”

They arrived at the top of a grassy hill and she finally stopped. She turned around and grabbed his hands, looking deep into his dark eyes, and he returned the stare. Two sets of ancient darkness connected at last.

“Do you want to know what I used to do for a living?” Lori asked.

He could only nod in response.

She lifted her head up to him and lightly kissed him on the mouth. “That.”

The man tried to take a step back, but the woman’s grip on his hands overpowered him and kept him in his place. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“I was . . . as you like to say, a ‘streetwalker’.”

“Oh,” the man said, and suddenly he understood everything.

“You don’t even remember me, do you?” she asked. There was a sense of hurt detected in her voice.

“I…I’m sorry,” he said. It was all he could offer. “It was an accident, I…if I had known—”

“How many others have you turned?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t know I turned any. I…I’m so sorry.”

Lori squeezed his hands again and then let go. She walked a few feet ahead of him, studying the horizon ahead of them. “You know, I’ve been searching for you for fifteen years now, waiting for this moment, thinking about what I would say to you, what I would do to hurt you. I always thought I’d get you to trust me and then lure you out into the woods, chain you to some big tree and leave you for the sun. But then I finally find you here, and I can see right away what you’re planning on doing, and it all defeats the purpose. You were going to do it regardless. It was so obvious.”

The man who was no longer a man said not a word.

“All these years, I’ve let my anger build up, tearing this country apart for you. And now you’re here, and I no longer want revenge. I don’t resent you anymore, because I see you for what you really are. What you’ve done…what’ve you done to *me,* you did it all to survive. Over the years, I’ve done the same. I…just…you know?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

Lori turned back toward him. “This *life* gets old real fast. And I’ve only been at it for fifteen years. I can’t imagine how you’ve endured this for so long. I’m done with it, though. I just can’t.”

“I know,” he said, and he did know. He was seeing in perfect clarity all of a sudden. Seven hours had almost come and gone. Just a few more minutes.

“You told me that the thing you’d want to remember the most—love,” she said, nearing him. She took his hands again, looking up at him. “Well, I can’t give you that. No one can. Love has long expired. But what I can give you is something better.”

“What’s that?” he asked, even though he already knew.

“I remember when Jesse was just a baby,” she said. “And the mornings he would wake up really early, I’d take him outside and sit with him on the swing, feeding him a bottle, and we’d sit there together and watch the sun rise. It was so beautiful.”

Lori leaned forever again and gave him another kiss. “We have to watch the sun rise one more time,” she said. “For my little boy. For myself. For you. For all of us.”

“Yes,” said the man who was no longer a man, and he smiled.

They stood there on top of the hill in each other’s arms, breathing in the sky surrounding them, watching as the clouds bled a sharp shade of vermillion. A knowing wind brushed passed their clothing as rays of sunlight shattered their dark world a new bright. They both continued to smile as the sun washed down from the heavens and carried them off to a new land.

Seven hours, and he had finally found peace.

And peace had found him.

Max Booth III

is the author of four books: *Toxicity* (Post Mortem Press, 2014), a black comedy crime novel; *The Mind is a Razorblade* (Kraken Press, 2014), a neo-noir horror novel; and two story collections, *True Stories Told By a Liar* (Numen Books, 2012) and *They Might Be Demons* (Dark Moon Books, 2013). He is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing.

Since 2011 he has been the Assistant Editor of *Dark Moon Digest* and has edited four anthologies: *Zombie Jesus and Other True Stories* (Dark Moon Books, 2012), *Zombies Need Love, Too* (Dark Moon Books, 2013), *So it Goes: a Tribute to Kurt Vonnegut* (Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, 2013), and *Long Distance Drunks: a Tribute to Charles Bukowski* (Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, 2014). He studied under award winning editor, Jennifer Brozek, for the *Beast Within 4: Gears & Growls* anthology.

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Dialogues with the Dead

Kate Monroe

London, 1872

They swarmed around him, an undulating mass of guilt threatening to steal away the very beats of his heart. John Macnair flailed in their midst as they advanced with arms outstretched, and reproach written all too clearly in the depths of their sunken eyes. Nothing he could do would save him now. They were here, and they had come for him.

They moved as one, milking his terror as if it were the very air they breathed. He sank to the ground with a choked cry no one paid heed to, for even as they surrounded him, they gazed past him into the distance, seemingly hungry for something he could not perceive. Dragged along amongst them, he tried in vain to shake off the grasping hands that closed around his face, but to no avail. As always, he was powerless to fight them. He could do nothing other than allow his guilt to consume him, to gnaw away at his twisted guts as each one of those around him told a wordless, eloquent tale of betrayal, deceit and regret.

The professor balled his fists, grounding them into his eyes, desperate to save himself from all that surrounded him. There could be no escape though, for there was nowhere to go but with them – until a mercifully cool hand descended onto his brow to wrench him back into the waking world.

"Professor? Won't you wake up, sir?"

Bessie. Her voice and mannerisms were rough, but there was no doubt the little maid's heart was in the right place. Inordinately grateful to her while sleep and the horrors it brought still had its claws deep in his exhausted body, John forced his sandpaper eyelids to peel back and focused on the flickering candle in her hand. Its flame danced merrily in the gentle night breeze, stripping away the grip his recurrent nightmare had on him until it was once more nothing but a memory.

"Professor, was it that same dream again?" she asked, drawing away from the bed as he struggled to sit up amongst tangled, sweat-drenched sheets. "You were screaming again, sir, and I think you are running a fever. Won't you let me send for the doctor?"

Now that he was fully conscious, he regretted taking the little maid into his confidence last week. Though endearing, and a surprising source of comfort whenever his piercing screams woke the manor in the dead of night, she had an irritating tendency to fuss over him until he could take no more. *Mithering*, his old grandmother had called it.

Strange, his grandmother's words should come to mind as if she were beside him speaking them once more, for tonight it had been her whom he saw more clearly than anyone else. It was little wonder she stood amongst the ranks of those haunting his nightmares, for she had more reasons than most to be there. He had missed her funeral, too caught up with his latest experiment. His head had been filled to the brim with ingenious formulae and algebra that leapt before his eyes, he had entirely lost track of passing days until a curt, icily written telegram landed on his doormat from his father, to inform him that he had been missed.

How John regretted that oversight! He always had suffered with a devotion to his work that bordered on the obsessive, even when Mary came along – but *no*. He could not let his thoughts turn in that direction, not when his unwelcome emotions were already so raw. He needed a distraction, and fortunately he knew just what to turn to.

His work; the one constant in his life that never let him down or deserted him. Tonight it would be the tonic he needed, to soothe the ills of the nightmares that filled his sleep without mercy. His mind made up, he stumbled to the floor without noticing the flush that inflamed the maid's skin, not even pausing to change out of his night clothes before he made a break for the door.

As the professor's trembling fingers closed around the door knob, he briefly turned back. "Bessie, would you be so good as to assist me with my experiment?"

With a tiny sigh, Bessie trailed in his wake with the candle still in her hand. "Of course, sir," she said, despite the yawn she masked with her free hand. "If I may be so bold, though, I really think you ought to ask the doctor for something to help you sleep."

"There is nothing wrong with me that my work will not cure," he told her curtly, his clenched jaw twitching as he spoke. "Now come along, if you please. Time waits for no man."

Perhaps that was not entirely true, not if his experiment succeeded. The few of his peers he tentatively voiced his theory to had laughingly

denounced him, but John clung onto his belief in the formulae he had devised during the long and lonely nights, after Mary. That was how he saw his life now; two halves, slashed asunder by a jagged divide marking the terrible night she had been taken from him. With Mary, and *after* Mary.

None of the rest mattered.

All that kept him going now was the hope he would somehow find a way to stitch the two broken halves back together, and that was what he had devoted himself to, to the exclusion of all else. Grief had a strange way of giving a focus nothing else could, and he had seized upon it to drive him onwards even when his experiment seemed doomed to fail. He could not give up now, not when the machine was so near completion.

Though his peers warned him – gently at first, not so much no now – that he was wasting his time, he could not give up when the next test might be the one to succeed. After all, even the most noted theorists of the age were stumbling blind through the wilderness when it came to time travel.

Time travel. Saying the words in his mind as he led the way through the manor's twisting corridors, it sounded like the ramblings of a mad man. Indeed, the rational part of his mind protested it that must be impossible, for any success would surely mean he would already remember it, but the other side of him, causing such pain, clung tenuously to the hope that the past him simply was not a part of the new memory he would make, once success came his way. He had always been stubborn to a fault, or so Mary told him on those long and glorious nights when they stayed awake together until the coming of dawn. He'd taken them for granted, fool that he was, but now the truth was he would gladly sacrifice anything in return for just one more day with her. If his machine worked, though, he would have far more than one solitary day to sustain him.

Tense with nervous anticipation, the professor took the key that always hung around his neck and unlocked the door to his workroom; the room once flagged as a potential nursery. He flinched, and only the sound of Bessie yawning again behind him kept him focused on the task at hand. Turning to take the candle from her, he lit the lamps on the wall and pulled back the curtain drapes. What scant moonlight was forcing its way through the rolling clouds helped to illuminate the room.

There was very little worthy taking note of in the large room. His vast work bench dominated it, along with the four foot tall brass contraption standing resplendent on top of it, and beside it, the bureau containing his

precious research. The only other object was a small faded photograph of Mary on their wedding day. John allowed himself only the swiftest of glances towards it before taking his seat at the desk and resting one hand against the oscillating lever.

"Now, Bessie," he said, pointing with the other hand to the polished dials on his left. "As I adjust this lever in tandem with the quantum flux wheel, I need you to take note of the numbers as they change. You are capable of making your mark, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Then you will find my ink, pen and notebook in the top drawer of the bureau."

The professor waited until she had taken them out before setting to work. Truth be told, he did not know for sure what it was he sought. The problem was that there seemed to be a near infinite number of permutations, and he had no idea which ones would open the rift in time and space – or if it even would work at all. All he could do was try.

He had done this so many times that the magnificent contraption now felt like no more, or less, than an extension of his hand. The mechanical heartbeat lulled him, as familiar as his own voice while it whirred merrily through the motions and sparks began to fly. Just as he had hoped, it was the balm he needed. Barely even noticing the passing of time or the nearing of dawn, he saw or heard nothing but his invention until the pen rolled out of Bessie's hand and clattered to the floor. Her eyes were heavily lidded, and as the low, mournful sound of an owl in the trees outside drifted in through the open window, her head slowly rolled to the side.

"Bessie!" he said sharply. "Kindly concentrate!"

The little maid started, a crimson flush searing her face as she grabbed for the fallen pen. "Sorry, sir; so sorry!"

John grimaced as he raised a monocle to his left eye and squinted at the droning cogs, oblivious once more to everything around him until an unnatural rasping sound rudely wrenched his attention away from the machine. Irritation blazed through his veins as he tossed the monocle aside and whirled on his chair to angrily berate Bessie for the fresh interruption, but the sight that greeted him brought with it such an onrush of terror that there was no longer any room in his mind for the anger which had burned so brightly a few moments before.

She was dying.

Someone – *something* – was strangling the life out of her body. The hands that closed around her throat were barely more than wisps of smoke, non-corporeal and impossible to fight. Bessie's bloodshot eyes bulged as she tried in vain to tear the hands away, but her fingers only closed around each other, as the physical embodiment of the professor's nightmares swarmed around her.

"No!" John said, his voice hoarse as his hands joined her to scrabble helplessly at her constricted throat. It made no sense, but the evidence before his eyes did not lie. Yet if he could not understand what was so intent upon murdering his maid, how could he hope to defeat it? Despair spread through his veins like a toxin, sapping his body and mind of all hope. His nightmares had bled through into reality, and he was just as powerless here as he ever was when he slept. Nothing could stop them. Whatever it was they sought, it seemed they were about to take it.

A violent shudder rippled through his body as he stared into the abyss, his eyes frozen wide open as the sight they witnessed seared into his mind. For a moment, he almost thought he saw faces amongst the mist, but then the assailants faded away to nothing once more. He watched, transfixed, as Bessie's head fell to her chest, and to his disbelief, when she spoke, it was not her voice issuing from her mouth. Instead, it was the voice that had haunted him without mercy for the last five years.

Ever since the day he became so engrossed in his work, that he had forgotten to drive the carriage to the station to fetch his beloved wife.

"*Listen to me, John!*" Mary's voice said, laden with an urgency that stole a beat of his pounding heart. "*I have no more than a few moments before they force me aside*."

The professor's hands shook as they reached out for his unseeing maid. "Mary?"

"*My love, there is no time. They are coming*."

"Who?" he asked, his head spinning as a hundred different emotions erupted inside. .

"*The dead. They came through whilst Bessie slept in such close proximity to the machine, just as they have bled through into your dreams, for whilst you are not conscious the divide is easier to breach – but John, what you see here is only the scouting group. Those who have a personal link with you have come through first in the medium of your dreams, but*

each time you operate your wonderful device, the breach widens. More will follow, and soon the damage you will not be able to repair."

"I...I do not understand …"

"*I do not have the time to help you do so. I should not be here, John. We are drawn back to this realm like a moth to the flame, but just as the moth burns, so do we. Yet before that, the damage that can be done in the meantime will tear this world to shreds, even without the chaos the less savoury amongst us will wreak. John, my love, you must stop it*!" she said, her shrill voice rising in pitch even as a thin trail of drool ran down Bessie's chin.

"But I do not know how, Mary!"

Bessie's mouth opened once more, but then a shiver flitted across her face before she lifted her head, her eyes unnaturally bright as her plump lips drew back into a wide, humourless smile, which sent a chill chasing down the full length of the professor's spine.

The raw wound of his wife's loss was torn open once more. "Now, my dear professor," she said, the voice no longer Mary's, yet not quite Bessie's. The maid began to advance on him as he stumbled backwards with his hand over his mouth. "I have always said you work too hard. Why not take your seat and sleep a while? I will watch over you, I promise."

John was lost at sea with nothing to cling to, adrift amongst the wreckage of all he had once known. The world no longer made sense. The one thing he was sure of, though, was that neither Mary nor Bessie now controlled the body before him. Its limbs were gangly, lacking all of the grace and coordination with which the maid usually bustled about the manor, and the words spoke were laced with a smug, mocking amusement neither of the two women were capable of.

"Be gone," he said as his eyes darted around the workshop in search of a weapon, relieved and no little amazed to hear how steady his voice sounded, despite his fear. "Whoever you are, foul creature, I command you now to leave this body in peace!"

"In peace?" Her top lip curled back. "I see there is no use in keeping up this pretence, but do you not realise what will happen if none of my kind are in this body? Professor, she will die."

The professor's stomach lurched. "Yet I believe she would prefer death to existing like this."

"Oh, I can assure you, John, nobody would prefer that!"

“What do you mean?”

With a soft snort of laughter, Bessie’s eyes flickered down. “So is this your latest paramour, professor?” the entity said, ignoring his terse question. “She is pretty, but not as lovely as your wife was. How I enjoyed sweet little Mary, John, before I broke her beyond repair! Aye, I think all I took from her was more than worth all you took from *me* in return.”

A loud, animalistic roar of rage filled the room, drenched in the same agony that haunted the professor ever since that fateful night, when his wife’s carriage was waylaid. It was not until he felt a sharp pain in his kneecaps, and saw he had collapsed to the floor, that John realised the sound was coming from him, for the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place.

It was him.

William McDowell. The man who abused and murdered Mary, leaving her broken body discarded at the side of the road for the carrion crows to feast upon when, deep in the dead of night, the professor finally realised the passing of time and rode out in terror to search for his long-overdue wife. Wild with grief, he had hunted down her murderer and exacted his revenge before the constabulary could exact the weight of the law; but even that had done nothing to lessen his pain, merely numbing it enough that he could function throughout the course of each day. Now, though, the man who had torn his life apart was here to mock him once more – and he would not take it!

Mary’s words burned brightly in the forefront of his mind as he leapt to his feet, seized a hammer from the workbench and whirled back around as the entities began to stream forth through the machine he had poured all his hopes into. They swarmed around the vessel of Bessie’s body as McDowell laughed loudly, but John knew what he had to do. Without even a moment’s hesitation he launched himself towards the machine, battling through grasping hands as he swung the hammer blindly from side to side, hacking them out of his way until his path was clear.

Again and again he struck, his eyes wild as he smashed his pride and joy to smithereens, destroying everything he had worked so hard for – yet still his nightmares came. There was only one thing for it. He lifted the hammer high above his head.

Then, his world went black.

The professor had tensed in anticipation of the pain, but it did not come. Indeed, his head now seemed surprisingly clear. Wary, he opened his eyes only to find himself alone. Even Bessie was gone. He struggled back to his feet from where he had fallen with the hammer at his side, while in same moment a gentle breeze swept around the room. Every muscle tensed once more, he turned around as a fresh voice spoke to greet him.

"There you are, John! I was wondering when you would join us. Take a walk with me."

Were it not for all he had seen and heard this night, John would have dismissed the words he heard as impossible. Now, though, he merely shook his head as if swatting away a fly and looked into none other than his own face.

The other John met his intent stare without flinching. There could be no doubt about it. In every way, the man before him was his double. The professor slowly stroked his chin as he racked his brain, and then finally fell into step at his side to walk away from the void where his time machine had once held pride of place.

"So, they truly were the dead?" John finally asked, at a loss for anything else to say to his double.

"Oh, yes, John," he replied affably. "The dead do not simply disappear. Have you heard it said that if weighed immediately before and after death, the human body actually loses a tiny amount of its weight?"

"Of course I have. I am you, remember?"

The other John flashed him a grin that was oddly boyish, lifting years away from his face and easing the lines he had never noticed were there before. Was this truly how he looked now? Truth be told, John did not know, for now that Mary was no longer around he never took the trouble to use the looking glass.

"There we are, then," he said, breaking the professor's morose train of thought. "You know the evidence that the body loses something upon death, and tonight you have had the unique experience of bearing witness to what that is. When the heart ceases to beat and the brain dies, our souls – for want of a better term – are taken from this realm, and the laws of physics dictate they can never return."

"Yet tonight, they did!"

"Precisely; and my dear fellow, there are doors that should never be opened. Now that this one has been; it must never be allowed to open

again."

John nodded fervently. "That much I understood, thanks to my beloved wife. That is why I destroyed the machine, once I realised what it had become."

His other self tilted his head to the side. "And what do you think it had become, John?"

"Why, the focal point for the breach, of course!"

"I am afraid that is not entirely accurate. It was the means by which the breach was created, but the souls needed a mortal form from which to draw the energy needed to cross it. *You* are the focus of this schism, John. The eye of the storm around which the cracks have formed. You attributed it to a nightmare, but the dream has overtaken the dreamer now. They are far more powerful than you; more powerful than any force science can possibly comprehend, and as Mary tried to explain, their very presence is enough to destroy everything that was, is, or will ever be."

This was all the professor's fault. Though he had done it unknowingly, it was his fault nonetheless. As they drew to a halt at the top of the staircase, he watched the first streaks of pink and amber cross the horizon outside, announcing the coming of dawn, before quietly speaking. "Is there a way in which I can make good my terrible mistake?"

"Yes. And most fortuitously, you knew precisely what it was, and have already taken the necessary steps - a sacrifice to plug the gap, as it were."

John's eyes widened, for now he understood it all. "Then I am...dead?"

His other self smiled despite the sadness in his eyes, while numerous wisps of smoke at the foot of the stairs coalesced into distinct, recognisable forms that howled with a rage that brought the professor to his knees, as he heard his own voice inside his head.

"How do you think it is I am here, talking to you now? This is no dream, John, not any more. From now on, your nightmares have become your reality."

Kate Monroe

is an author and journalist who lives in a quiet and inspirational corner of southern England. She has penchants for chocolate, horror and loud guitars, and a fatal weakness for red wine. Her interests in writing range from horror to erotica, taking in historical romance and tales of the paranormal on the way; whatever she has dreamed about the night before is liable to find its way onto the page in some form or another.

Her debut full-length novel, The Falcon's Chase, was released by Pink Pepper Press (an imprint of Sirens Call Publications) in 2012, and she has had short stories published in anthologies by Smart Rhino Publications, Angelic Knight Press, Sirens Call Publications, Rainstorm Press, Scarlett River Press and Cruentus Libri Press, with further anthologies to be released throughout 2013. Her first horror novel, Carpe Nectem, was published in October 2013.

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Chosen

Rebecca Besser

Paul stopped at the mailboxes and inserted his key into the gray metal box, the one with 5K boldly marked across the front. He heard a loud click behind him and knew Withers was there, watching him again.

He pretended not to notice as he withdrew his mail, flipping through the envelopes in his hand. Soon, he heard another click and the door to apartment 1B closed.

Sighing, Paul glanced over his shoulder at Withers' door. There was something about the old man that was slightly off. He wondered if senility was setting in. He'd never actually met the man, but Withers always took the time to watch him whenever he got his mail, no matter what the hour. Paul was keeping some pretty interesting hours too, since he was the newest intern at the local hospital. The only reason he even knew the man's name, was because it was on the mailbox for 1B. Paul knew it was a man because he'd caught a glimpse of him one morning when he opened his door to get the paper.

Mya, the woman who lived in 5J, was just getting on the elevator to go upstairs when Paul spotted her. He hurried to catch up with her, his sneakers squeaking on the tiled floor with each step.

She turned to him and smiled. "Home late again, I see."

Laughing, he stepped into the elevator beside her. "Speak for yourself. Another late night at the diner?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I've been working too much, but it pays the bills and keeps me busy."

Paul grinned at the petite brunette as he leaned forward, pushing the button for the fifth floor.

"How's the internship going?" she asked politely.

Mya was an older woman with grown children who lived far away. She often chatted with Paul when they happened to bump into each other. He figured she was as lonely as he was, and the conversations were therapeutic for both of them. Even polite interest was better than no interest at all.

"Not too bad," Paul told her. "Hectic, but I'm certainly learning a lot."

"That's good." She said.

Paul glanced down at the mail still in his hand and frowned. “What’s the deal with Withers, in 1B? He’s always watching me.”

Mya laughed. “Don’t worry. He does that to everyone. You’ll get used to it. Besides, Old Man Withers is harmless.”

“Old Man Withers?” he said with a grin. “Sounds like maybe he’s something of a legend?”

“Something like that,” she said. “He’s the oldest resident, in both age and occupancy. He doesn’t come out of his apartment much, but when he does he’s always ranting about a freezer and certain doom. He tries to scare off every single man that moves in here.”

Paul chuckled uneasily. “Sounds interesting. But, I’m single and he hasn’t tried to run me off yet.”

They arrived at their floor and the door slid open with a ding.

Mya stepped out of the elevator and into the hallway, turning back to give him a playful wink. “Don’t worry. He will eventually.”

“No one has ever tried to run me off before,” he said.

She laughed, shaking her head as she inserted her key into the lock on her door. “Get some rest, you look worn out.”

“I will. Good night.”

“Good night to you, too,” Mya said before stepping into her apartment and closing the door.

Paul sighed as he entered his own apartment. He *was* worn out. He worked too much and could really use a break, but that wasn’t going to happen any time soon.

He locked the door behind him, slipped off his shoes, put his mail on a small stand in the hall, and went to take a shower.

The hot spray felt good on his tired, achy muscles, and he stood there until the water started to cool. After toweling dry, he pulled on a pair of cotton boxer shorts and slid into bed. In moments, he fell into a deep sleep.

***

Paul woke up shivering. He struggled to make his frozen limbs move, trying to get out of bed. As his feet touched the floor, a hiss escaped his lips and he quickly lifted them again. The hardwood was covered in frost.

Looking around the moonlit room, he saw that snow and ice were blowing out of the vents.

Paul slid his feet into his frost encrusted slippers and shuffled his way out of the bedroom. Teeth chattering and arms shaking, he headed into the hallway to read the thermostat, checking the temperature of his surroundings. He was shocked to see 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Glimpsing a sign of movement near the entrance to his bedroom, he made his way back down the hall to peer inside. A woman was kneeling on his bed. She had long, curly blonde hair that hung down her back and over one shoulder. Her eyes were a clear aqua blue, and there was a sweetly seductive smile on her ruby lips. Paul's eyes traveled from her round, pixie face, down over her body, enveloped in a white silk nightgown.

"Paul," she whispered and held out her hands, beckoning him closer.

Paul frowned, closed his eyes, and shook his head. When he opened them and looked into his room again, he had to squint as the sunlight streaming through the windows nearly blinded him. The darkness disappeared with the frost, but the shiver he had lingered.

Walking slowly and cautiously into his bedroom, Paul searched all around: under the bed, behind the door, and even in the closet. The woman was gone.

Sitting down on the bed, Paul rubbed his face with his hands, wondering if he was going crazy.

The clock on the night stand caught his eye and he realized that if he didn't hurry, he was going be late for work.

As Paul dressed, the normalcy of the everyday task displaced the weirdness of what surely must have been a strange dream… Shrugging it off, he blamed it on his over stressed brain and left for work.

***

For the next few weeks nothing strange happened to Paul. All was normal and quiet in his life. Then, the dreams started. Intense, vivid dreams of walking through a winter landscape with the woman he'd seen on his bed that fateful morning. She never said anything except his name, and she never touched him; or, rather, he could never get close enough to touch *her*.

This went on for a while, then the dreaming stopped as suddenly as it had started. Paul actually found himself missing the woman. Before drifting off at night, he would toss and turn fretfully, wondering if she would visit him, only to be disappointed in the morning when he woke. One morning

when Paul was leaving for work, he walked past a vent downstairs on his way out, and heard a distant voice whisper his name.

He knew it was her.

He stepped back and knelt down beside it, pressing his face against the cold metal as he peered through the grate, hoping to see her sweet face on the other side. He sighed at the sight of the black void beyond.

Standing, he turned to leave when something cold encased his ankle. Instantly, an icy shaft of numbness climbed up his leg, making him gasp. When he looked down, he didn't see anything, but he could not move his leg. It was like something had a hold of him and wouldn't let go. That's when he heard it again – his name whispered through the vent.

Frantically, he tugged his leg until it was loose. As he plastered himself against the far wall, he noticed that on the floor where his foot had just been imprisoned, there was a thin layer of frost…in the shape of his shoe print.

It took most of the day before feeling returned to his leg, and he feared going home, wondering what would happen next. He didn't know what the hell was going on, or who the woman was, or why she seemed so focused on him…

It was twilight when Paul tentatively entered the apartment building. He stood inside the door and looked the place over, from the floor to the ceiling. As he was doing so, he noticed that the door to apartment 1B was open a crack and an eye was watching him. The door quickly shut when the owner of the eye realized he'd been noticed.

Old Man Withers.

Paul boldly walked up to 1B and knocked on the door. No answer. He knocked again, more forcefully. The door opened a crack with the security chain still intact.

"What?" Old Man Withers barked. "I don't want anything. So take what you're selling and move on, son."

"I'm not selling anything," Paul said. "I was wondering if I could talk to you for a few minutes. I have some questions about the building and its history."

"Well then," Old Man Withers said. "Talk."

Paul took a deep breath. "May I come in and speak with you? This involves something of a personal nature."

Withers stared at Paul for a moment before the door shut, and then Paul heard rattling as the chain was removed. The door reopened moments later.

"You can come in," Old Man Withers said. "But no funny business or I'll toss you out on your butt."

Paul nodded and stepped inside, noting that there were stacks of old newspapers everywhere. The place reeked of dust and muscle-rub.

"This way, son," Withers said, shuffling down the hall, narrowly missing the stacks.

Paul followed, careful not to disturb anything.

They entered the living room, which was filled with even more stacks of aging, yellow newspapers.

"Feel free to move something so you can sit down," Withers said, grunting as he lowered himself into his recliner; the only empty seat in the place.

Paul gingerly moved a stack of papers from the corner cushion of the couch, next to Withers' chair. After setting them gently on the floor, he lowered himself onto the musty sofa.

"So, what do you want?"

Paul rubbed his palms on his thighs, trying to think of where to start. He couldn't figure out how to ask if the building was haunted by a beautiful blonde ghost without sounding crazy. He decided to just go for it; he didn't care if this old man thought he was insane.

"You've lived here a long time," Paul began. "Have you ever heard of the place being haunted? Haunted by a woman? With blonde hair and blue eyes?"

"Ah, so that's it," Withers said with a smirk. "You're having women troubles and decided to play with the old man downstairs?"

"No. No, sir."

Old Man Withers laughed. "Easy, son, I was just yanking your chain."

Withers slowly rose from his chair and went wandering around the room, humming to himself.

Paul wondered if the old man had flipped off the deep end long ago, because Withers didn't seem to realize he was still there. Withers watched as he sorted through various stacks of papers, happily humming. At one point Withers actually started singing out loud, waving a paper in the air and shuffling about like he was dancing with someone.

Paul was about to say something when Withers spun and looked right at him.

"Found it," Withers said, waving a yellow, curled newspaper in the younger man's face.

Paul sneezed. "Found what?"

Withers sat back down and gingerly opened the paper. "Is this her?"

Paul had to restrain his instinct to snatch the paper out of the old man's hands. "Yes, that's her. How did you know?"

"Well, she was murdered here years ago," Withers said, handing Paul the paper. "Was a sad day, it was. Such a pretty young thing, too."

Paul quickly read the article.

He was shocked to read that the young woman, Bella, had fallen in with a bad character of some sort. He'd tied her up, stuffed her in a deep freezer, and left her in there to die. No one knew who the man was or what had happened to him. He appeared and disappeared in just one month. He hadn't been friendly with the neighbors; they'd rarely seen him. It'd been an additional week before her body had been discovered.

The old man had nodded off in the silence.

"This is terrible," Paul exclaimed, startling Withers awake from his quick nap. "Did they ever catch the man who did it?"

"Nope, never caught him," Withers told him with a yawn. "She haunts this place now, visiting young men every now and again. I think she's lonely and looking for a bit of company, if you know what I mean."

Paul frowned and shook his head as Withers winked salaciously.

Ignoring his insinuation, Paul thought aloud, "It's so sad."

Withers sighed. "Yes, it is. Nothing anyone can do…was a long time ago. Matter of fact you're the first one in a long time that's seen her. Wonder what she has planned for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, last time she came for a visit, she played a lot of games with a young man until he went crazy and moved out."

"She hardly seems dangerous," Paul said with a laugh. But his thoughts flashed back to the incident in the hall earlier that day.

"Maybe not yet, but don't turn your back on her, or you just might be sorry."

"Thank you," Paul said standing, holding out his hand. "I appreciate your taking the time to speak with me."

Withers shook Paul's hand with a strange expression on his face. "No, problem, son, just watch your back."

Paul nodded and showed himself out.

That night as he lay in bed, he couldn't get thoughts of Bella and her demise out of his head; it was a terrible way to die. That's when he realized that he'd come to care for her. That he had looked forward to her visits, and missed her when she didn't come. That maybe…maybe he'd fallen in love with her.

At some point, Paul drifted off to sleep, still thinking about Bella.

Late that night he awoke with a start, feeling like he'd only been asleep for moments, but the clock told a different story. The air in his bedroom was frigid. His breath puffed out steaming clouds as he exhaled.

"Bella? Are you here?"

"Paul," she whispered, standing in the doorway, gazing at him affectionately.

"What do you want? Why do you keep coming to visit me?" he asked, sitting up in bed.

"I want *you*, Paul," Bella said and glided across the room – her bare feet leaving a trail of frost on the hardwood floor in her wake.

She crawled up onto the bed and knelt in front of him.

Paul was captivated by her beauty and felt like he could easily drown in her cool blue eyes. He didn't notice that frost was crawling across the blankets, getting closer and closer to him.

"I love you, Paul," Bella whispered, leaning forward. "I want you to love me. Do you love me?"

"Yes," Paul exhaled.

"Then kiss me," she breathed, her lips mere inches from his. "Kiss me if you love me."

Paul ignored the cold that was surrounding him, blind to everything except her. He didn't even feel the coldness of her breath as it caressed his lips.

Leaning forward he kissed her, gasping at the contact. It froze him and set him on fire all at once. He cupped his hand around the back of her neck and held her to him, deepening the kiss until he didn't know where he ended and she began.

Moments passed before Paul realized he was shivering, that he couldn't move or breathe. He tried to pull away, but his body wouldn't

listen to him.

Bella kept kissing him, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

He tried to push her away, but it was impossible. The cold finally consumed him, and Paul's world went dark.

***

Withers held the morning newspaper in his hand as he watched the police officers board the elevator, going to the fifth floor to investigate. He knew they wouldn't find anything that would explain why Paul had been found in his bed, frozen to death.

Bella had chosen him. She'd taken another lover.

Withers sighed and closed his door. Looking down at the paper in his hands, he shook his head at the headline on the front page: "MAN FOUND FROZEN, ICE BOX KILLER STRIKES AGAIN!"

Withers wandered down the hall and laid the paper on a stack by the bathroom door. The stack that held the newspapers about the Ice Box Killer, and the all the men who had been found frozen to death in the building.

Rebecca Besser

resides in Ohio with her wonderful husband and amazing son. They've come to accept her quirks as normal while she writes anything and everything that makes her inner demons squeal with delight. She's best known for her work in adult horror, but has been published in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for a variety of age groups and genres. She's entirely too cute to be scary in person, so she turns to the page to instill fear into the hearts of the masses. She's currently seeking an agent with her first novel, *Nurse Blood*, with hopes to expand her reach of dread through a mass market publication in the future. Meanwhile, you can join her dark minions by learning more about her on her blog or website:

Blog: www.rebeccabesser.com

Website: blog.rebeccabesser.com

The House on Cedar Street

Sean Farren

Physically imposing, the Vickers Mansion loomed above town, perched high up on a hill at the end of Main Street. Its location was chosen specifically by Old Man Vickers, whose Christian name was Nathan, because the mansion's stature in relation to the town below would serve as a constant indication of the family's prominence in the community.

Jake McKinney stood at the corner of Main and Cedar, sneaking a puff of a cigarette during his mid-morning break. The autumn rain drizzled down his company vest and name tag, a telling sign of his place in the world. Hunched under the shredded awning of a vacant storefront, he stared up at the house.

Vickers constructed the façade in such a way that it loomed over Main Street, facing west, allowing the rising sun to cast a giant shadow below, a daily reminder of the Vickers name and its importance. Similarly, when the sun set in the west, the house would be illuminated in its glory, all the while maintaining an eerie visage to those on an evening stroll.

When McKinney looked at the house, he shuddered; part of that might have been from the chill creeping into the season. He'd always found the Vicker's place imposing even though decay had set in long before Nathan started rotting in his grave. The once bright red bricks were weathered and brown. Cracked wood dangled from the widow's walk high above, occasionally dropping onto the roof below. Vines grew wild and crept their way up the sides of the house, strangling and squeezing the shutters on the windows and covering the panes like cataracts on eyes.

Still, Jake couldn't shake the feeling the house was looking down, not only on the town below, but also, particularly, at him. He felt it was a gaze filled with some sort of disdain, almost as if he had somehow let it down.

Of course, Jake felt that way a lot lately.

Once a self-made man, Jake enjoyed the fruits of his labors in his mid-twenties. He was the proprietor of a local hardware store and did some appliance repair on the side. Thanks to his knowledge of tools, carpentry and the like, he was a success. His penchant for repairing just about anything brought in almost as much as the store, because it was all under the table, away from the prying eyes of the I.R.S.

Then again, Jake always was good with his hands. He could fix almost anything.

Almost.

He couldn't fix the hard times, the recession of the past few years which saw his business go under, his marriage fail, and his boys with him only every other weekend. His self-reliance was once an invisible badge of honor, now replaced by a very real one that read, "Welcome to Wal-Mart. My name is Jake. How may I help you?"

Jake flicked his smoke into the street where it bounced and did a somersault into the sewer. He brushed his hand through his hair, tossing droplets of rain to the ground below, and got into his car, surveying the intersection and pulling a U-turn. As he drove away, the Vickers place disappeared in his rearview mirror, shrinking in the background.

Even so Jake could sense it still watching him.

***

Around ten that night, Jake closed the bedroom door after checking on his twin boys. They were fast asleep, probably from the excitement of their impending thirteenth birthday. He told them he had something special planned. They looked on as he placed an internet order for an ice cream cake. They could barely sit still as they watched TV and, in their own sly way, pestered him about presents. He loved them, but what he really needed was some alone time and a nice cold beer.

Jake stirred in his chair, bolting upright when he heard someone calling his name. His hand tilted, spilling lukewarm beer onto his tee shirt and gym shorts.

"Jake", the voice repeated in a flat monotone. He could tell it was a child's voice, but knew it belonged to neither of his sons. Nevertheless, Jake looked toward the bedroom door. It was closed.

"Flakey Jake", said the child's voice again, this time a little louder. Jake swiveled toward the stool in the corner of the room. Stepping out of the shadows was the figure of a boy around twelve. His tattered clothes were covered with mold, dust, and cobwebs. And his face…

…was only partially there.

Jake gasped, horrified at the sight. One of his eyes was missing, a ball of maggots in the empty socket twisting and squirming over one another.

His mouth, a terrifying rictus of insane glee. A tiny skeletal hand rose up, creaking and clacking until it reached his forehead in a motion designed to brush through hair, but instead removing rotted gray flesh to reveal a skull.

Jake screamed and ran into the bathroom, turning on the water as quickly as possible. He splashed it on his face, rubbing vigorously before looking up and into the mirror. *There's only one person that ever called me by that name,* he thought to himself. *And that was…*

***

Dean ran his sausage-like fingers through the black, prickly hairs of his crew cut.

"You comin', Flakey Jake, or chickening out?" he asked.

The warm sun of that late summer's day, back in 1978, glistened off the sweat on Dean's head and Jake pointed at him and chuckled, elbowing his other friend Larry in the ribs.

"Just pacing myself, brush head", Jake replied. Sweat ran down his face and he shook his head vigorously, his long hair flinging sweat in every direction. Larry slapped him on the back and stuck out his tongue, part of which worked its way into the gap between his eye teeth. Jake couldn't help but smile as they lagged behind the rest of the pack by at least ten yards.

Larry and Jake were best friends; the goof-offs of the group, always pulling up the rear, but quick with a quip. Jake, solidly built with a mop of sandy blonde hair, both contrasted and complemented the tall, sinewy Larry, whose shock of bright red hair and sunburned skin earned him the nickname 'Cheeto'.

The rest of the group, which included Dean, Arnie, and Mac, the latter of whom was Dean's twin brother, were hustling down Cedar Street. Mac was, of course, the spitting image of Dean, just as stocky and squat. The 'Buddies Holly', as they were most commonly referred to, were the oldest of the five at thirteen. They wore thick, black framed glasses, and were set to attend a private Catholic school in the fall, destined to shore up the football team's otherwise weak offensive line. Arnie was the bookworm, tall, lanky, and bespectacled who already walked with the confident stride of an older man.

Though the boys joked, there was a growing unease among the five as they approached the gate of the Vicker's mansion.

He didn't want to admit it to the rest of them, but Jake felt the most apprehensive, especially after looking up at the windows. He felt imaginary eyes watching him, flickering with excitement as he drew closer.

Dean and Mac reached the gate first, each grabbing it from the opposite side, one to push, one to pull. It squealed as they yanked it away from the stone pillar, creating just enough room for each boy to slip through. The five of them were quiet as they stepped over the foliage and the rubble of the once smooth driveway, inching ever closer to the house.

The house.

They'd all heard the rumors. The stories were part of the town lore and history. Though none of their parents had ever said a word, the tales were passed down among siblings or over campfires in the dead of night. Hell, they'd been around even before Old Man Vickers ended up in the ground.

Tales about the house included seeing a ghostly female figure strolling aimlessly around the widow's walk, strange red lights glowing from the windows on the top floor, sacrifices of children, and even ominous laughter heard by random passersby.

Probably the most terrifying of all the stories revolved around the high pitched screams of children, rumored to be heard in the dead of night, just days before Nathan died. Those close to the mansion originally thought it was the wail of a fire truck speeding by, on its way to put out a major blaze. Neighbors were roused from deep sleep and congregated at the corner of Main and Cedar, but there was no roar of an engine, no follow up siren. The next day, several early risers in the neighborhood swore they saw a hearse parked at the top of the long driveway, and men clad in black suits loading two small caskets into the rear.

At any rate, the two Vickers boys were never seen nor heard from again.

Dean and Mac, ever the brave ones, for years dismissed the legends as 'hooey' and wanted to visit the house just once before their new school forced all of them to go their separate ways. Dares had been tossed back and forth among the group since the first grade but there was never any real effort to see what the fuss was all about.

Side by side, they stood defiant and fearless at the bottom of what used to be a long, grand set of concrete steps, now chipped and in ruins. They could see the front door half open, the rotted wood having fallen away

in pieces, giving it the appearance of a gaping maw with one jagged tooth jutting up from the ground.

As the boys stepped forward, careful to maintain their balance, Jake again lagged behind, the sensation growing stronger that something was very wrong about the place. As they reached the door, he opened his mouth to tell everyone they should turn back, but then thought better of it. He was already inadvertently labeled a 'chicken' and any display of uncertainty would cement that reputation.

Had he known that this would be the last time they would see one another, he might have lived with that mark against his character.

They climbed through the door and switched on the flashlights they'd brought along. Cobwebs and dust were the prevalent form of décor and the air had a musty, dead fragrance about it. Larry waved his flashlight around and the beam wandered to and fro along the walls.

And that's when he screamed and jumped at the face staring back at him.

Nathan Vickers was undoubtedly an imposing figure, and the painting on the wall did nothing to belie that assumption. His scowl looked down upon the boys, temporarily frightening them until Dean stepped forward and shined his light on it, reaffirming that it was only a painting, and not Old Man Vickers in the flesh.

It creeped the hell out of them and they fell silent.

"Bet at least two of you have a fudgecicle in your shorts. Flakey Jake here probably has two." Dean's voice wavered a bit, but his joke breathed a little life back into the stale room and they all chuckled.

The boys began to explore the massive downstairs and moved steadily as a unit through the living room, the dining room, as well as the kitchen; the floorboards creaking and straining as they wound their way through the mansion. They ventured up the winding staircase to the floor above; Dean suggested the boys split into two groups. The 'Buddies Holly' would take the third floor while Arnie, Larry, and Jake explored the second.

The three watched the two ascend the staircase, and then moved forward down the hall, arriving at the master bedroom. Arnie turned the knob and they entered. The beams of light moved around the room and dust drifted and traveled about in the air. Larry stepped aside, apart from the group, crept over to the vanity and waved the beam over the table. He saw

nothing but dust. Larry let the beam wander over the mirror and saw Jake and Arnie a few feet behind him, standing side by side.

A loud thump hit the table and he brought the beam down, staring at two fresh handprints. When he brought the beam back to the mirror, his face was a mask of terror as he noticed only Jake. Before he could ask what happened to Arnie, Dean and Mac screamed in unison from somewhere above.

Larry and Jake rushed through the door and into the hallway. Jake ran to the stairs leading up to the third floor while Larry bolted toward the stairs to the ground floor. Jake turned to yell at Larry, and, in the beam of his flashlight, he saw chalky white hands wrap around Larry's shoulders, pulling him not towards the stairs but into the darkened hallway beyond.

Jake took the stairs two at a time, reaching the upper landing in moments. Spying two beams of light spreading across the floor in the distance, he sprinted down the hall. He hurried toward the light and grabbed the door frame to catch himself.

Jake peered into the room. The lifeless bodies of Dean and Mac slumped in small coffins propped against the wall, as two figures clad in black suits held coffin lids in their chalky white hands. Jake gasped and the figures slowly turned their ghostly heads toward him, their alabaster skin pulled tight across their skulls, save for their mouths which were comprised only of bone and sharp teeth.

He turned to run and made it to the top step before something yanked him backward into the darkness.

In the days after Jake's memories flooded back; he felt as if he had an itch at the base of his brain. It was like one of those itches that, when scratched, doesn't alleviate the irritation, but the compulsion remained There was something he had to do, but couldn't quite figure out what it was.

***

His boys' birthday celebration went off without a hitch. Though it was just a small one with only the three of them, they ended up having a great time, with the boys' only complaint being the odd taste of the ice cream cake. Jake told them that it was probably a little too much flavoring in the chocolate.

They were unconscious within minutes, and Jake carried them to the car one by one. Their mother wouldn't be by until the morning, so he had plenty of time.

Within a half hour, Jake pulled the car up to the curb on Main and stared up at the house on Cedar Street. The itch at the base of his skull subsided and he felt a little better. He also thought that the house looked upon him with approval as it stood proud over the sleepy little town. He even caught a glimpse of Dean and Mac in the doorway, beckoning him.

Or maybe that was his imagination. At that point, he wasn't so sure.

Jake wouldn't have any trouble getting the boys up to the house, though it would take two trips to get them inside. He planned to stay with them as long as he could. He knew he'd make it at least to midnight as the clock wound down.

He hoped they wouldn't wake up after the sun set. Everything would be a lot easier that way. Even while the neighbors were roused as they had been so many years ago, his boys would eventually become part of the Vickers legend.

The itch all but vanished as he carried his first son through the gate.

***

A high pitched scream rang through the living room and Jake sprang to his feet, hastily roused from a deep slumber. He pivoted, looking frantically around the room until realizing it was coming from the TV set.

He looked down at the chair, noticing the remote tucked between the cushion and the armrest. With a sigh of relief, he grabbed it and turned down the volume.

The hazy morning sun crept softly through the slats on the blind, casting a faint glow into the corner of the room. Jake was relieved. There was no sign of Dean, just dust particles skittering and dancing in the soft light.

One beer and my imagination runs wild, he thought, shaking his head and laughing.

Rubbing one hand over his eyes and the other idly across his beer stained clothing, Jake shuffled across the room toward the bedroom door. Yawning, he turned the knob and opened it.

Jake froze as he stepped through the doorway. His sons sat upright in their beds, grinning sardonically as skin decayed in flaps, peeling off their skulls and jawbones. Their eyes missing, yet staring right at him through the hollow sockets. Dean stood between them, appearing as he did just hours before.

All three began to move toward Jake, their arms extended in anticipation of a grotesque group hug.

Jake's breathy yawn gave way to a guttural scream that bounced off the walls of the apartment. He tried to step back, away from them and out of the room.

The door slammed shut behind him.

Somewhere, on the edge of town, but not too far away, the house on Cedar Street stood watching.

Sean Farren

is a graduate of Marquette University and has been a fan of the horror genre since growing up in the 1970s. He is an avid reader who has drawn inspiration from authors such as Stephen King, Richard Matheson, Rod Serling, Bentley Little and Charles Beaumont.

Though he has written TV reviews for Examiner.com and contributes to his horror related website, thisoldhauntedhouse.com, his first love is fiction and he is elated to see his first horror story printed in this anthology.

Sean currently resides in Pittsburgh, PA with his beautiful wife Hollie, their two spirited dogs and a rather cantankerous cat.

A Shadow

Mathias Jansson

In the mirror

An edge of darkness around my soul,

I can feel him growing stronger.

One day I will not be able

To control him any longer.

He will walk out from the mirror

My black shadow from the past,

The insane mind of mine

The murderer inside

Presenting himself

As Mr. Hyde.

Mathias Jansson

is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call and The Poetry Box. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction as Suffer Eternal anthology Volume 1-3, Hell Whore Anthology Volume 1-3, Barnyard Horror and Serial Killers Tres Tria. Homepage,: http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se

The Patrol

Kenneth W. Cain

It neared morning and all remained quiet on the German front. As the war torn mist of the previous night rose from the ground, barricade to trench, not a noise could be heard. Everyone knew it would be temporary. At any moment the thunder of open fire would ring out again, breathing new life into the war. Anyone left out in the open would be riddled with bullets or blown apart by mortar shells.

Cole's troop had only just arrived; reinforcements for an already faltering front. He lowered his body deep into the hole, staying quiet as a mouse. Here he would wait in solitude until the signal came to move forward. To pass the time, he pondered what men might have braved this hole prior to him.

A patrol had been sent out a few hours earlier to identify the enemy's location. This maneuver would no doubt be countered. When either side discovered the other, the skies would rain down fire.

He didn't mind the tense seclusion of this hole. Better this than ending up worm food topside. The sort of hole that was dug to bury a man held far less appeal. This was the most dreadful scenario, without the cozy comfort of a grave to usher you onward to the next life. But sometimes the enemy seemed to prefer this end. Cole had witnessed men strung up, entangled in barbed wire, and left there to rot. More than one of his enemies had used this tactic to ward off backup forces. It was a caution not spoken, but seen. And Cole knew what it had said to him.

Here lay the rotting corpses of our enemies. Let them serve as a warning. Do not cross this line.

He recognized the symbolism well, lines drawn in blood and yet still they crossed. It had not been the first such offense, nor would it be the last. Given enough corpses, the enemy had at least once seeded an entire field with them. In fact, this was what he had observed on the way to this front.

The rotting corpses were strewn about to show the horror these men experienced before succumbing to death. Stark faces told each story. Their bodies produced an aura that spoke fathoms of the atrocities men never wanted to discuss aloud. Each whispered the same advice, *leave while you still can*.

Yet, the troops pushed forward through the maggot-infested field of American scarecrows. Toward what? He was no longer sure he could answer this question, as they seemed so far from a cease-fire. He often pondered it, tried to define why they still fought. After some of what he had witnessed, freedom now eluded him. Of all the dead he had stumbled across, not one had been truly free, and would never be again.

As he pulled out of his thoughts, branches crunched along the tree line behind him. He spun and lifted his rifle toward the noise. His bayonet glistened in the fading moonlight, a clear threat of impending puncture. The brash footsteps steadied and then someone intruded upon his hole, quicker than he had anticipated. Nerves in a jumble, he went to call for help, but it was too late.

A body leaped into the air from the edge of the hole, as if flung. Cole lifted his bayonet to meet the intruder's liver. Given a split-second glimpse, he recognized the uniform. For an instant, he considered impaling the soldier despite the fact they wore the same uniform. It would serve him right for such a startling intrusion. Then he lowered his gun before any damage could be inflicted.

The meddlesome soldier's feet roused a cloud of dirt when he landed. Then he threw his back against the torn earthen wall, brought his gun in tight against his chest, and lowered to his haunches.

Cole's muzzle remained pointed at the soldier's face, a clear message never to surprise anyone again. He gazed at the mud-covered face, identified the young skin hidden beneath layers of dirt. This boy likely hadn't known any better. With reluctance, he lowered his weapon and leaned it against the dirt wall.

"You ought to watch yourself from now on."

"Sorry." The boy's whisper wavered, as he regarded Cole's wide-eyed expression. "I got anxious."

"Don't worry about it." He could not keep his voice from trembling, still in shock from the sudden intrusion. "I've been a tad anxious myself since I got here. Maybe I'm even a little trigger-happy. Say, did you hear anything about the patrol?"

The boy frowned, but said nothing.

"I think all hell will break loose sooner than I'd like it to."

"Yes, all hell." The boy lifted his head above the edge of the hole and stared out toward the enemy lines. His voice became distant, trailed off in

the direction he looked. “All hell.”

“So, did you…?”

Without turning to look he interrupted, stating flatly, “They’re all dead.”

“*Dead*?”

Shock filled Cole. How could he know that? If that were the case, their weapons would have lit up the sky by now. The boy’s insolence perturbed him. “What makes you so sure they’re dead?”

The boy did not answer.

Maybe a *freshie* like this kid might have developed this mindset after he stepped onto the battlefield for the first time. A man needed to stay grounded, especially after witnessing the horrors war had to offer.

Without waiting any longer, he changed the subject. “The names Cole Cates.”

He extended his hand in the typical male bravado. The boy glanced at the hand, studied it, and seemed unsure that it was real. Cole withdrew his hand when the boy turned away from the gesture. The young man lowered himself back into the hole and offered a nod instead.

“Todd...Todd Billingsworth.”

Todd’s face now appeared older than it had just a moment ago, sunken and pale, traumatized by the frights of war. Too many men shared that same face. They had witnessed unheard tragedies, seen artillery drill the life out of men until they were no longer identifiable as humans. They had seen organs meant to remain inside of the body spilled out for all to see. These were not atrocities meant for the everyday eye, but here it was commonplace nonetheless. All this death and destruction hardened a man, Cole included.

He remembered seeing the misplaced intestines of one young man still in his teens. A grenade had left the boy’s stomach splayed open, a landslide of guts spilled from his belly. The boy had not known enough of his situation to realize he was already dead. Frantic hands worked trying to replace the necessary organs. Cole had wanted to free the boy of this fate, but not even a soldier with stronger resolve could spare a bullet for such a thing. Cole could only hope God’s hand had been swift, for the boy’s sake.

Todd lifted his head to scan out over the dirt edge of the hole again. “Sad. It’s so sad,” he muttered, as if gaining insight to Cole’s thoughts.

Cole agreed, unaware of what Todd had been referring to. “Sad, indeed.” He paused, and then tried to change the subject again. “Hey, where you from Billingsworth?”

Their eyes met. Todd had a cold stare. It emanated an eerie vibe, as if it were a precursor to death. Todd glanced up to the night sky and a frown furrowed across his brow.

“Huntington, Texas.”

His whisper sounded dreamy. Todd’s eyes glazed over, a whimsical smile forming on his dirt-ridden lips.

Cole wondered if he still held the same warmth for his own hometown. “Philadelphia.”

He found he did not, but so little waited for him back home. Cole had lived alone for years, kept to himself even at work. And up until Todd clamored into this hole, he had been content with his solitude.

Minutes passed with nothing to say. Todd continued to peer out over the top of the hole, to where the patrol had gone. He mumbled to himself, but Cole did not mind. War made self-dialogue a rather normal occurrence. Checking his gun, he tried to ignore Todd’s ramblings.

Most people off the streets of the United States would think a man like Todd schizophrenic. Here, those odd idiosyncrasies were what made a soldier human, a way of managing the emotions you could not keep bottled up. How could a man wearing a three piece suit ever understand what any such soldier endured? At best they could read about it in the morning newspaper, or glimpse some semblance of it during some two-bit movie. These soldiers had *lived* it, inside and out. Without doubt, Todd Billingsworth served as a prime example.

“I wonder how the patrol is managing.” Cole had not even realized he had spoken this thought aloud; an attempt to alleviate his own concerns.

Todd’s mumbling stopped and he spun on Cole. The stoic expression pressed on his face chilled Cole to his core.

“I said that they were dead.”

Todd’s gaze returned to the woods, penetrating deeper into the brush. Cole had somewhat expected this response, but still did not care to hear it. He fought against the claim.

“You don’t know that. I’m sure they’re fine.”

Maybe in heightening his register, he had hoped to stave off Todd’s concern. So often, the younger a soldier was, the more difficult it was to

swallow the harsh realities of war. Keeping faith was damn near impossible. In his late twenties, Cole had already accepted much more than young Todd might ever get the chance to.

Still, Todd's eyes searched the area that the patrol had left for. He appeared mesmerized by this locale; although he claimed to already know of their demise. Cole sat back and watched. A sense of growing concern itched inside of him.

"Nate Hatcher's with them. You know Nate?" Todd asked.

Cole shook his head, but heard fondness in Todd's voice when he referred to this man. Perhaps he had found some conviction after all. Truth was, Cole did not think he knew any of the men on the patrol. He praised God for this blessing, as like it or not, the odds had been against those men from the start.

Todd smiled, "You'd like Nate. Everyone likes Nate."

Cole forced a smile, although he was sure Todd had not noticed. Cole believed him. Some guys had a way of making everything seem lighter from day to day. These types carried a certain air, and those who kept their company could never inhale enough of it.

"Scott Fisher's there, too."

This time Todd spoke softer. It was difficult to hear him. Cole thought he knew Scott, but decided not to reveal this detail. He had never been much of a conversationalist anyway. Also, it became apparent that Todd knew most of the men on the patrol. Cole did not want to add to whatever morose thoughts prevailed in Todd's mind.

The moon glistened in the early morning sky like a bright, white button. A few clouds teased around it, as the stars gradually winked out and gave way to the promise of a new day. With so much destruction surrounding them, it was easy to dwell on nature's exquisite beauty.

Morning dew glistened over the landscape, before fading back into a dreadful fog, which twisted through the trees in a ghost-like fashion. It slithered across the land like some ominous snake, breathing in the scent of the dead. More would soon share in this same fate.

The sun touched the horizon; brought with it a brilliant glare of orange. Daylight had come and the fog finished rolling through, satisfied for now with the lives it had tasted. Men would once more commence with the killing of one another. Cole felt this in his bones and he despised that it should come so soon, after the brief delight of such a picturesque morning.

Todd sighed, shock still sewn into his cheekbones. He continued to stare into the distance. He squinted, as if trying to see beyond the thinning fog, past the tree line. Or perhaps something else prevented him from seeing what he wanted.

"They really are dead, you know?"

Cole already knew the answer, but still he asked. "Who is?"

Todd offered a bothered look. "*The patrol*."

Cole tried not to, but couldn't keep from sneering. Again, Todd didn't notice. The strange young man only kept staring off into the distance.

"I really wish you would stop saying that," Cole said after a brief pause.

Sadness spread across Todd's face. "But they are."

Todd seemed on the verge of a breakdown. But Cole also thought the boy's assessment was correct. They had yet to hear anything all through the night, and there had been no forward progress. No talk and no advancement could only mean the patrol had failed.

Cole lifted himself, tried to see what Todd saw. "Can you see them from here?"

"I don't have to." A wrinkle of distress spread across Todd's temple. The boy swung around, returning his back to the dirt wall. He took deep, heavy breaths all at once. His voice became stricken with panic and Todd Billingsworth began to scream. "Dead! They're all dead!"

"Quiet, you fool!" Cole patted the air trying to calm the boy. "You'll draw attention to our location."

The last thing he wanted was for a grenade to end up in the hole with them. He feared ending up half-alive, like that boy he had seen, hopelessly trying to reassemble his body.

Cole tried to soothe Todd again. "It's okay. We'll be okay, kid."

He ignored Cole. "They're all dead, I said!"

The boy's eyes twitched and Cole considered tackling him, forcing him to be quiet. Instead, Cole tried using words once more. "You have to settle down, okay? It's okay. I'm right here with you, and I get it, kid. I get it."

Still, Todd refused to settle. Cole had seen guys go down this path before. Todd was too caught up in the nightmare of it all, unable to wake from its dreadful grasp.

Todd stood up well over the edge of the foxhole and screamed louder. “All dead! They’re all dead!”

Cole squatted beside him, wanting to restrain him. He expected the enemy would see Todd and shoot him before he got the chance. “Damn it, Todd, get down here!”

But nothing seemed to faze him. His screams grew with intensity. And then Todd lifted a leg, tried to scamper out of the hole, but the dirt collapsed beneath his knees.

Cole jumped up, not wanting to interfere, but having no other choice. Todd made him nervous, more so than he had felt in a long time.

Looking back at Cole, Todd mumbled something incomprehensible. Cole thought it had been some damning comment in reference to the patrol. And then Todd thrust his leg up again and lifted his torso out of the hole, the rest of his body close behind.

Cole thought to let him go, relieve himself of this insanity, but he could not. He shot a hand out in an attempt to seize Todd’s trailing foot, to yank the boy back into the hole with him. But instead of grasping Todd’s foot, his hand passed right through it. Cole stumbled back against the dirt wall as he yanked, pulling back a handful of crumbling earth and nothing else. Still able to see above the rim of the hole, he watched as Todd rose to his feet and ran toward the patrol.

Cole glanced to his left, then his right. To his surprise, no one else was in awe of the ruckus, making him the sole witness to Todd crossing the battlefield, screaming about the patrol’s demise. And when Todd neared the tree line, he vanished into the shadows of the woods.

Letting his back slide down along the dirt wall, Cole found himself mystified. He sat up, mumbling to himself. He reached out and pulled his feet in closer. His heart raced as confusion overwhelmed him. Irrational thoughts and fears baffled him. When he thought he had grasped some understanding of it all, a rustling stirred behind him. Branches broke, and then footsteps were at the edge of the hole. Cole did not bother reaching for his gun. He was exhausted in more than one sense.

A soldier soared into the hole, landing in a puff of dirt. Todd Billingsworth leaned back hard against the wall, and stared back at Cole with nervous anticipation of the dead in the distance beyond.

Kenneth W. Cain

is the author of the SAGA OF I (THESE TRESPASSES, GRAVE REVELATIONS, RECKONING), THE DEAD CIVIL WAR, the acclaimed short story collection THESE OLD TALES, and his latest short story collection FRESH CUT TALES. He lives with his wife and children in Eastern Pennsylvania.

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Whispers

Mark Slade

Sunday, Oct. 30th 11:54 P.M.

"Did you hear that?" Clive asked as he suddenly sat up in bed.

His wife, Miriam, opened her eyes a bit before closing them again. "Hear what?" She inquired groggily.

"I heard a whisper?" Clive switched on the lamp sitting on the nightstand next to him. "I swear, I heard a voice."

"Clive." Miriam turned on her left side and groaned. "Go back to sleep. "There are no whispers...no voices. Just like last night; you're imagining things."

"So, what are you saying, Miriam? Are you saying I'm crazy?" Clive cautiously slid out of bed. His ears perked up as he stood to one side.

"Of course I'm not saying that." Miriam slurred her words in a dream-like voice. There were several moments of silence before she slipped back into a peaceful slumber, snoring loudly. Clive thought it sounded like a chainsaw running out of gas.

"I know what I heard," Clive muttered.

What?" Miriam jolted back up, wide-eyed.

"I said, I know what I heard." He announced.

She stared at him for a few seconds before her eyes clouded over. There was a moment of angry clarity. Miriam slammed her fists hard on the bed, causing the springs to creak.

"Clive! Come to bed this instant! I'll tell you something! You are a terribly selfish man. I have to get up early, to take on the investors in *your* dead father's wine company. Now.... let. Me. Get. Some. Sleep!"

Clive let out a heavy sigh. He fiddled with his hands, just as he always did when he was distressed. Miriam had been behaving, as she just did, more frequently. Since she'd been appointed chairperson of Grey Matter Wines. She took over the company after proving to the board of investors that her husband was a complete idiot; possibly even mildly retarded. Besides, he had failed to produce an advertising campaign that would bring success back to the company.

Clive had made up his mind the day before that he did not like his wife anymore.

Reluctantly, Clive climbed back into bed, pulling the satin comforter over himself.

Monday, Oct. 31st 1:30 A.M.

"There it is again," Clive said. He was sitting on the side of the bed. The darkness of the bedroom was cut into three long ribbons by a neon sign from the liquor store across the street. Clive listened more closely, rubbed his aching neck with one hand.

"What the hell are they saying?" Clive asked the darkness.

Miriam stirred. The sheets rustled underneath her. She turned on her back, licking her dry lips. "You are driving me crazy, Clive."

"I can't help it, Miriam." He replied automatically. "These...voices. I don't understand..."

"Darling," Miriam drawled, leaning over to Clive and running her fingers down the back of his t-shirt. "If you come over here, I can help you fall asleep."

Clive looked at her, momentarily dumbstruck. Miriam smiled seductively at him heaving her chest. His head jerked back toward the darkness, and he began to speak, only to be interrupted by a thumping sound, made by Miriam patting the bed.

"Come here." Miriam demanded.

Monday, Oct. 31st 3:45 A.M.

"Why?" Clive asked.

Miriam opened her eyes and saw Clive standing by the bedroom door, looking into the soft glow from the night light in hallway. She rose slowly, tossing the comforter off. Miriam tugged at the hem of her nightgown, relaxing it from thighs that were sticky with sweat. She eased her way towards Clive, walking softly.

"Clive," She whispered. "Who are you talking to?"

Clive didn't answer at first. His attention was prominently attuned to the darkness, as well as from the small nightlight. He acted irritated with her as he shook his head, speaking to the hallway. "No, I don't think I should. Something...feels wrong about this." Clive punched the door frame, and Miriam noticed his knuckles were black and blue.

She felt a little afraid. Her husband had gone mad; she could tell by the tone of his voice. *That's not the voice of a rational man*, she told herself. She needed him to calm down, convince him to go back to sleep. Maybe even cancel the morning board meeting in order to get Clive to a doctor...

She took Clive by the hand. He turned his head swiftly to look at her, his eyes wild, his mouth ajar. A long stream of spittle ran down his chin. She pulled on his hand a little, urging him to follow her. He glanced out in the hallway, then back at Miriam. She could tell he felt lost, unsure of what to do. She pulled again, flashing him a nervous smile.

Miriam led Clive to the bed, placing him gingerly on his side, pulling the covers over him in a motherly fashion. His eyes danced in an unfamiliar void. Tentatively, she climbed onto her side…Under the comforter, she slid closer to Clive, throwing an arm over him.

"Close your eyes, darling," Miriam whispered. "Everything will be alright."

Miriam swallowed hard, praying she was right.

Monday, Oct. 31st 4:15 A.M.

Clive was at the bedroom door again, staring out into the hallway. This time, Miriam didn't stir. Clive was listening again, more astutely than before. He still heard the whispers, only the voices made more sense now. The voices became one clear voice.

It was the voice of his father.

There was a blinding, bright light surrounding the hallway now. The light was warm, soft, yet brisk; sharply chilling.

"*Please, son*," The voice held a soothing tone, but was strangely cold at the same time. "*Come to the light. Come to your father, Clive I need you*."

"No," Clive whispered back. "I can't leave Miriam; she needs me."

"*I need you more. I just need you to help me get to the other side. Please...then I'll return you. I promise. I can't do this without you*."

"You—you promise?" Clive staggered closer to the light. "I have to be here for Miriam, she would be so unhappy without me..."

"*I promise, son. I will return you, after you get me to the other side*." Clive's father assured him.

Clive stepped into the glowing light. The light caressed him, eventually swallowing him. It was a warm, happy light at first. So loving. Clive didn't miss his father anymore. Though he could not see him, he could feel his presence. He could see the outline of a body. Clive pushed further into the nurturing light.

Then, suddenly, it disintegrated into darkness.

There was cold, damp air enveloping Clive. A stinging, icy touch was upon him. The nurturing, warm love faded into a harsh, cruel hatred. The outline of the body became more visible. It was a strange creature with a gray oval body. A large head sat upon its broad shoulders. Four twisted arms reached out with its claws and grabbed hold of Clive, pulling him closer to it. The creature peeled back its large head to reveal a wide mouth, with four sets of tiny sharpened teeth, rotating in different directions.

In one foul swoop, Clive was thrown into the creature's mouth.

Monday, Oct. 31st 2:25 P.M.

"Are you saying you found Clive?" Miriam asked the police detectives, named Logan and Swanson.

Swanson gave Logan a look. Logan shrugged, raising an eyebrow. Swanson sighed heavily.

"Okay, Mrs. Kelp," Logan began. "This is damn weird."

"Damn weird." Swanson repeated.

"What is?" Miriam demanded.

"Yes, we found your husband. He's, well, dead…like you thought."

"I told you. I had a feeling he was." Miriam wiped a few long streams of tears from her cheek with the back of her hand.

"Yeah." Logan cleared his throat.

"Ma'am, my partner is having a hard time coming to grips with what we saw." Swanson choked a little on his words.

"And I'm no babe in the woods, Mrs. Kelp." Logan tossed in quickly.

"We found your husband behind the dumpster across the street, behind the liquor store." Swanson informed her…

"We figure, after what you said…well, that he'd been acting strange lately," Logan said.

"Yes, kind of daffy," Miriam added.

Swanson gave out an uneasy laugh, and then stifled it quickly.

“He must have wandered out, and someone, maybe a wino…”

“They…did him in.” Logan sighed again, closing his eyes momentarily. When he reopened them, unchecked tears rolled down his chubby cheeks. “I guess it's a pretty clear cut case of murder. No sign of struggle. Didn't look like he'd been dumped at all, not that we can tell.”

“So,” Miriam struggled to complete her sentence carefully. “What was so *damn weird* about this? I mean.....”

“I *know* what you mean,” Logan said.

Swanson chimed in. “We both *know* what you mean.”

“You see,” Logan began again. “His body was intact. Not a mark on him. None what-so ever? But we know he had to have been murdered...we just need an autopsy to learn more. The thing is...the thing is, your husband was missing so much body mass that he was just a lump...the, the bones were gone.”

“Completely gone,” Swanson finished for Logan, hanging his head.

“Can you think of anything strange that has happened in the past few days, or weeks?” The seasoned detective’s voice broke at the thought of the horrific crime.

Tuesday, Sept. 28th 6:56 P.M.

“I don't care what Clive says,” Miriam told herself. “I'm opening this attic door. I'm tired of him thinking he can control me.”

Miriam pulled the yellow cord and the small trap door fell open to reveal a narrow staircase. A blinding light followed, swallowing Miriam. She heard a stinging, cold voice.

“Bring me three souls, so I can enter your world.” The voice commanded in a whisper. “I will spare you, and, promise you a great gift.”

Monday, Oct. 31St 2:45 P.M.

“No,” Miriam said. “Nothing I can think of.”

Swanson looked over at Logan, who just shrugged. “Ok, thanks.” Swanson tried to smile solemnly.

“If you do think of anything.” Logan said, “Please, give us a call.”

“Of course,” Miriam nodded. “Would you two care for some Pineapple upside down cake, and some coffee?” Miriam’s voice was just

above a whisper. The detectives exchanged glances, then nodded. Neither saw the malicious smile that crossed Miriam’s face...

Mark Slade

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He runs the short story podcast *DARK DREAMS*, and his latest book (*A Six Gun and the Queen of Light*) has just been released by Horrified Press. Mark is also co-editor of 'Nightmare Illustrated'.
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Desperate Dreams

Chantal Boudreau

A recurring nightmare...

Grant walked into his dorm room after another night of partying and womanizing. He expected to find his best friend and roomie there, because Colin spent every available free moment hitting the books. He didn't socialize, didn't goof off in any way; like Grant did. Colin had ambitions to be a doctor as well as a high school sweetheart he had left behind, but to whom he remained loyal. Colin was the high achiever with lofty dreams and goals, while Grant just coasted, barely scraping by. They both knew who was more likely to be successful someday, because of their approaches to life.

So that's why the gun Colin held to his head with trembling fingers caught Grant totally by surprise.

Grant knew things hadn't been going totally Colin's way, despite his best efforts. First came the terrible news that Colin's mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The impact from that had been twofold. Aside from the constant worry that she might not recover, even with treatment, it suddenly meant his parents didn't have the money to support Colin's education anymore. He had to take on a part-time job and his grades had suffered badly for it. School had never come easy for Colin, unlike Grant. It wasn't fair, but it was what it was.

Failing one of his exams had been the second big blow. It meant he wasn't going to be accepted into pre-med unless he repeated that course, which meant another year of studying and more money. Grant would have laughed it off, but he didn't care the way Colin did. His roommate had taken the news poorly, sinking into a quiet depression.

All of this was bad, but it wasn't enough to lead to that gun pressed to Colin's temple. Grant had no idea where *that* had come from. His heart raced as he tried to figure out how he should react. If he grabbed for the gun, it might go off. If he reached for it carefully, Colin might react to that as well and shoot before Grant could finish the gesture. All Grant knew was that he didn't want to lose Colin this way. The world needed more people like Colin, unselfish people who actually cared about the rest of the world,

while people like Grant, just another warm body in the room, were a dime a dozen.

He stood frozen, desperately trying to decide what to do, but sure whatever he chose might end in disaster. The image of seeing Colin's blood and brains splattered across the wall wouldn't be something he could ever cleanse from his thoughts, if it were to happen.

Grant made a decision, calmly speaking Colin's name. His best friend's finger twitched...

The shrill ring of Grant's phone jarred him out of sleep. He hated that nightmare, but it continued to haunt him long after he had actually managed to avert Colin's attempt at suicide. Grant figured it would fade with time, but it never did. The dream was always accompanied by horrible feelings of panic, dread and doubt. Half the time, in the nightmare, Colin succeeded in his suicide, as Grant was forced to watch in horror, all the while knowing that wasn't what had happened.

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Grant had, instead, approached Colin that day, quietly talking to him in an encouraging, calm tone as he carefully grasped the gun held in his friend's shaking hand. Grant had firmly pried it from Colin's fingers after turning it away from the young man's head.

Once he had removed the gun, well away from Colin's reach, Grant noticed a crumpled piece of paper on the floor by Colin's chair and had picked it up to examine it. The balled-up note had been a "Dear John" letter from his sweetheart. She had not remained faithful, unlike Colin, and was pregnant with another man's child. She had written the letter to inform Colin she was marrying this other man. Apparently, that had been the last straw.

Grant considered his rescue of Colin that day to be his one real success in life. Otherwise, he was the perpetual screw-up. Not that Grant was a total failure. He had an education, but he had graduated at the bottom of his class; he had a job, but it was a dead-end one without any prospect for advancement in the future and little chance of even a lateral move. He had some semblance of a social life, but mostly he lived vicariously through Colin. His love life consisted of casual relationships with woman; he was married in Vegas once to a woman he barely knew, followed by a quickie

divorce, and engaged once to a woman Grant thought he loved. He had been caught philandering before the wedding, and that had ended in disaster as well.

The phone rang a second time, reminding Grant what had woken him in the first place. He reached for it, rubbing groggily at his eyes.

"This better be good – it's three-thirty in the fucking morning," he grumbled into the receiver.

"Grant..?"

He stiffened, suddenly fully awake. The voice on the other end was that of Sabrina, Colin's wife of twelve years. The way she had said his name was tremulous and distressed. It held the kind of emotion that could only be bad news. Not to mention Sabrina would never call Grant at this time of the morning. She didn't really like Grant, but tolerated him for Colin's sake.

"Yeah," he replied softly. All the annoyance had left his voice, knots of worry immediately forming in the pit of his stomach.

"There has been an accident. Can you come down to County General? My sister's watching the kids, but I – I don't...I can't...," He could hear her composure rapidly crumbling, quiet sobs on the other end of the line.

"I'll be right there. Hang on."

With his pants only partially-zipped, hair mussed, five o-clock shadow, no socks, and his shirt only half on, Grant flew out the door and into a waiting cab. He was surprised that Sabrina had called him, considering the politely awkward relationship that existed between the two for Colin's sake. She wasn't thinking of herself at that moment, however. She knew Colin would want Grant there, so she had set aside her own discomfort and made that call.

Grant surprised himself when he made it into the waiting room, instinctively going up to Sabrina and giving her a heart-felt hug. She cried into his shoulder for a few moments before she could finally talk again.

"What happened?" he asked.

"A car accident. He was on his way home from a work function. He wasn't drinking – he never did at those things. He promised me. But the guy who hit him was. The bastard ran a red light and struck our car. The doctors say that Colin is suffering from severe head trauma. They told me there's not much chance he'll make it, and that I should get his affairs in order." Sabrina looked up at Grant, her green eyes filled with tears and her lip

trembling. “What am I going to do without him? The kids...how do I tell them?”

“It’s not over yet. Colin’s not the type to give up,” Grant offered, letting her cling to him. He knew otherwise, though. Colin had almost given up once when things were bad enough. Grant had managed to change things then, but he couldn’t exactly fix things now.

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A second dream...

Grant was in the dorm room again, that familiar and terribly unpleasant scene replaying. But unlike real-life, where the outcome had been decided and Colin lived through the suicide attempt, Grant felt like he was flipping a coin each time he had to face the same event in his sleep. In a Schrodinger’s cat-like setting, he never knew how the situation would resolve itself, half the time Colin safe and crying from grief and shame on his bed, which was what had actually happened, the other half the young man was sprawled dead in his chair, the contents of his skull plastering the opposite wall.

This time, the coin-flip did not work in Colin’s favour. As Grant tried to work the gun away, Colin pulled the trigger. In response to the spray of gore and instant horror which followed, Grant jolted awake with a yelp, almost spilling Sabrina onto the floor in the process. They had fallen asleep curled up together on the waiting room couch, hoping for more news, preferably the good kind.

Sabrina stirred but did not wake up, exhausted from not having slept at all the night before. Grant looked down at her sweet face, traced with worry even after escaping consciousness. She adored Colin, and he couldn’t blame her.

Colin was everything that Grant wasn’t. After the near suicide, Colin had sought out counselling, to avoid a repeat of the incident. His counsellor had helped him deal with the stress from his mother’s illness and the loss of his girlfriend, and after some discussion, Colin had abandoned his idea for pre-med and switched programs, opting for social work instead. The coursework was better matched to his abilities, and the program to his personality. It had been a change for the better. With the kind of spirit and dedication Colin brought to his work, he managed to complete his studies

and soon after started his career, working at a neighbourhood outreach centre; where he had met Sabrina.

Grant had to admit the couple were perfect for each other, even if she had always taken issue with the unhealthy habits of her husband's best friend. Colin and Sabrina were beautiful together; their two daughters, Ella and Karyn, were beautiful as well. They brought light into the world. They brought hope and joy to others' lives. Grant didn't do any of that.

It was obvious to Grant that the situation was totally unfair. Grant's sparing of Colin was the only positive thing he had ever done, the only meaningful thing in his life, and now, thanks to this accident, it was proving to be only temporary. He didn't think it made any sense. Colin deserved to go on. He deserved to live well into old age, loving his family and making the world a better place. Grant was probably going to stay a permanent bachelor, trudging his way through a cold and lonely life until he was forced into retirement. Then he would likely drink himself to death. What morose purpose would that serve?

The more he thought about, the more it made sense that Grant should be the one lying in that hospital bed, dying. But truthfully, Grant was the type who would be more likely to cause such an accident, rather than end up its tragic victim. He had never lived his life responsibly – he had just been lucky until now.

Lost in thought, Grant almost didn't notice the nurse approaching.

"You're Mr. Gordie's family?"

Grant nodded. Sabrina certainly was and he might as well be.

"You can go in and see him now, but only for a few moments. They have him stabilized for the time being. He isn't conscious, but it may help just to be there for him."

He knew she meant *this is your chance to say your good-byes*. Grant gently shook Sabrina awake and they went into the dimly lit room where a heavily bandaged Colin was littered with wires and tubes.

"He told me, you know," Sabrina said as they sat beside Colin, staring helplessly.

"Told you what?"

"I wanted him to stop spending time with you. I thought you were a bad influence on the family. I didn't like you. So he told me what you did for him in college...the way you talked him down...how calm you were." She drew in a ragged breath. "I had to like you after that. I wouldn't have

had him in my life at all, if it hadn't been for you. I never thanked you for that, but I never tried to stop him from seeing you again."

Grant wasn't sure how to react to that. She had just pointed out the one thing he already knew. The only act of any value ever made in his life was about to cease to exist. Then Grant wouldn't even have that anymore. It did explain why she had summoned Grant to the hospital when she knew Colin was dying. Maybe, in a strange way, she thought he could stop it from happening a second time.

They fell back into awkward silence again after that – watching...waiting...lost.

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After two days at the hospital without anything much in the way of food or sleep, the nursing staff advised Grant to go home and get some real rest. While still alive, Colin's condition continued to degrade. The doctors predicted he wouldn't last much longer, but as much as Grant wanted to stay to support Sabrina, collapsing from exhaustion wasn't going to help her any. Grant prayed that Colin would hang on long enough for him to get rested and return.

Another dream did not come as a surprise, but Grant sensed a distinct difference this time. He was aware he was dreaming and wondered if he was experiencing the type of lucid dreaming he had heard of; where a person can influence the outcome. What was even odder was that he didn't feel like he was alone. Not that the Colin in his dream seemed aware that he was a figment of Grant's nocturnal imagination. Somebody else was there, someone who chose to address Grant directly as he stepped into the dorm room.

"You robbed me," the blurred figure said to him. The other presence hovered beside Colin, unseen by his suicidal roommate. An incorporeal being of shadow and haze, it had a silhouette that was almost human and an essence to it that was almost electric, but rather than giving off energy, it seemed to be sucking it in.

"What are you talking about," Grant replied. "I don't even know who...or what...you are." Grant could hear the lie in his words, mingled with his desperation. He did know.

"Yes you do. Everyone knows who I am and everyone fears me, although sometimes they don't realize it until it's too late. I had a fifty-fifty

chance of claiming Colin that day, until you interfered. You were the catalyst, throwing things off in another direction. You stole him from me. I had proper odds of reaping a soul that day, and you unbalanced the odds against me."

Grant's breath caught in his throat, heart pounding.

"Colin didn't deserve to die...he still doesn't. Besides, he still might have succeeded even with me intervening. The dreams I have, where things went the other way..."

"Not real," the reaper rasped. "Those nightmares are the fabrication of your own making, a manifestation of your fears. You know Colin. He wouldn't have subjected you to that kind of trauma – he would have never forced you to watch. As soon as he was aware you were in the room, he was safe. But he hadn't been thinking about you before that – hadn't considered the consequences beyond himself. Like I said, you robbed me. You weren't supposed to be back for another two hours. It could have gone either way without you there."

The only reason Grant had been there, he recalled, is because he had overindulged the night before. He had decided to skip class and go back to bed, to sleep off the after-effects. He had been there to stop Colin simply because he had been irresponsible, as usual.

Grant knew the reaper was right. For all the nightmares he had suffered through, Colin never would have pulled the trigger with him in the room. The moment he had spoken Colin's name, his friend had been safe. Grant didn't actually have to talk him down. All he had had to do was stay put.

"And that's why this is happening now," the reaper continued. "I didn't get my fair shot at him twenty years ago. I wasn't supposed to come back for another twenty if he had chosen to live by his own volition. Instead, I get to split the difference. I suppose I could be grateful; if you hadn't interfered, I had just as much chance of having to delay this reaping any longer."

Grant felt his heart sink.

"This is my fault? But I saved him. How is that wrong?"

The reaper shrugged.

"I don't make the rules, I just follow them. He lost the courage to try it again, thanks to you. You helped him cheat death, possibly. We'll never know what would have happened, otherwise."

“This isn’t fair. Why should Colin be punished for trying to protect a friend? There should be more people in the world like him. He deserved a second chance. Look at all the good things Colin has accomplished. If anyone should be dying young it should be *me*. I’ve never taken care of my health. I don’t do anything worthwhile with my time and energy. I’m selfish and I really don’t give a damn about anything. Heck, I don’t even donate my spare change to charity.”

Something shifted in the air when Grant said this, the energies surrounding him and the reaper suddenly less cloying.

“Are you suggesting a trade, then?” the hazy figure asked.

Grant froze and stood staring at the reaper for a few seconds, unblinking.

“Is that even an option?” Grant drew breath in as he said this, inhaling the words more than speaking them.

“It’s always an option. My instructions are to reap a soul this day, from this place. It was supposed to be Colin Gordie’s, but your’s will do in a pinch.”

Grant couldn’t see the reaper’s face, but from his tone of voice he got the sense he was smiling, like some leering spectral clown. An internal war ensued as he struggled with both the need to live and the desire to spare Colin. He went through all the arguments that had tormented him in the past, when he’d been jealous of his friend’s happiness and success, when he had lamented his own failures. It all came down to one thing. If Colin died now, it nullified Grant’s one and *only* positive impression upon the world. Which did he want more? To live out the rest of his crummy, go-nowhere life, or to leave a legitimate legacy?

“And he gets his twenty years back? If I agree to this trade?”

The reaper laughed.

“That and then some. You weren’t on schedule for another thirty-seven years. It will be a proper trade, Mr. Harnish. He gets what you give up.”

Grant thought about it long and hard. It wouldn’t be the same as the last time he had come to Colin’s rescue. Nobody would know what he had done if he chose to make the sacrifice, not even Colin. This would be the one and only truly altruistic act in Grant’s life... if he agreed to make the trade.

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The phone rang beside Grant's bed. It continued to ring, and ring, and ring. Sabrina was calling with good news. Colin had miraculously been roused from his coma, and from what the doctors had to say, there was much hope that he would eventually make a complete recovery. It was rare for such things to happen, but they had seen it on occasion. Apparently, Colin had proven to be one of the lucky ones.

But nobody would be there to answer that call.

Chantal Boudreau

is an accountant by day and an author/illustrator during evenings and weekends, who lives by the ocean in beautiful Nova Scotia, Canada with her husband and two children. In addition to being a CMA-MBA, she has a BA with a major in English. A member of the Horror Writers Association, she writes and illustrates horror, dark fantasy and fantasy and has had several of her stories published in a variety of horror anthologies, online journals and magazines. Fervor, her debut novel, a dystopian science fantasy tale, was released in March of 2011 by May December Publications, followed by its sequels, Elevation, Transcendence and Providence. Magic University, the first in her fantasy series, Masters & Renegades, made its appearance in September 2011 and its sequel, Casualties of War followed in 2012. Prisoners of Fate, book three in the series, will be her next release.

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The Twenty

Ray J Robbio

I could feel my knees shaking as I was called on to speak. I had attended these meetings for some time now, but had only been a passive observer, never a contributor. My mouth felt like it had cotton balls in it, and I took a gulp of my bottled water before standing. I could feel the eyes of the room fall upon me as I made my way up to the podium. I felt dizzy and nauseous, like I was drunk. I would have given anything for a hit of cocaine.

"Hi," I said loudly, *much* too loudly. "My name is Nick, and I'm an alcoholic."

Everyone responded with the customary, 'Hi Nick', before falling silent.

"Um, it's been six hours since my last drink." I struggled for something else to say. I could feel sweat beading up on my forehead, as the few seconds I paused seemed to stretch into minutes.

"Nick," the moderator chimed in. "Why don't you tell us about your experience with not drinking the last six hours."

I thought for a moment, trying to think of something interesting to say, and then I remembered last night.

"Ok," I tried to smile. "Well, it's funny, ya' know. Drinking and drugs get such a hold on you that it's all you think about. I have a demon on my shoulder all the time; helping me to get the next fix. His voice is always hard to keep quiet. I try playing video games, or watching TV, but he's always there in the background telling me that what I am doing isn't enough. He's a real bastard."

I paused, hoping for some semblance of reassurance from the crowd, or a measure of understanding, but they just continued staring at me.

"Um, anyway, I decided last night not to listen to him. I chose to go to bed early instead. The amazing thing about my demon is, he has a way of getting into my dreams. The dream I had last night was so intense that I'd like to share it with you, if that's ok?"

I looked to the moderator for approval.

"Of course, go right ahead," he encouraged.

"In my dream, I woke up at about eleven and sat straight up in bed, feeling as if the demon was tapping me on the shoulder. I was shivering. My

body felt like it was burning up, but I was freezing cold. Anyway, he convinced me that I needed to get a drink. The problem is I was broke and my cupboards were bare. All of the liquor bottles I had littering the floor were empty, and I panicked. I quickly dressed and headed out to the convenience store on the corner. They carry a small supply of booze, enough to satisfy me in a pinch. The night was particularly dark, and, weirdly enough, the street lights were all flickering."

I paused again, not sure if they understood what I was talking about.

"Ya' know, it's a dream. There are things that don't make any sense. Like, there was a bum sitting on the street corner asking for money. Really? At eleven at night? Funny thing is, as I'm crossing the street, I watch a guy giving him a twenty. I'm sure he's going to trade that twenty in for booze. What a waste! The demon tries to convince me that he isn't deserving of such generosity. And, I must admit, he has a point. I mean, the guy's a bum. He's just sitting there! I at least *work* for my money. Whether it's hustling the assholes down the street playing dice, or swiping some rich bitch's pocketbook, I, at least, put the time and effort in. That fuckin' bum was just sitting there, with that stupid sign."

The moderator quietly interrupted me, reminding me to watch my language. "I'm sorry," I muttered, not even realizing that I swore, or how crazy I sounded.

"Anyway, the sign read; '*Please donate whatever you can. I have three kids at home and I need food*'. I'm mad now. Really? You have three kids? I wasn't born yesterday, ya' know? The demon agreed with me. The bum *had to* be lying. Somehow, in my mind, lying wasn't acceptable. I'm at least honest about my intentions. Anyway, I crossed over to where he was sitting. As I got closer, he started with his bullshit speech, asking me for money. I could feel this rage building inside of me. It didn't help that the demon kept taunting me, like a fly buzzing around my head. I would try to swat him away, but he would keep coming back. I told the bum to gimmie his money. He told me he didn't have any. Again, liar! I reached down and grabbed the cup from his hand, sending the change spilling all over the sidewalk.

"Really? What's this then?" I asked.

"Please, sir, this is all I have. I need it for my kids."

"What's your son's name, Jack Daniels?" I grabbed the few dollars that were on the ground, searching among them for the twenty.

"Where's the twenty?" I demanded.

"I don't have a twenty." He pleaded.

I really hate liars so I took out my knife and waved it at him threateningly.

"Give me the fucking money, you asshole," I yelled. I didn't want to kill him, just make him think I was going to. How I actually ended up stabbing him is still a mystery to me. I'm sure the demon had something to do with it. He's always taking things to the extreme. His motto is *better them than you*. And, I really can't disagree with his philosophy.

Anyway, in this dream I stabbed him until my arm started to hurt. Surprisingly, there were no cops around; no people of any kind. Dreams are weird like that.

I searched his body and found the twenty I was looking for tucked in his back pocket, along with a picture of some kids. Amazing the lengths these bums will go to just to score a couple of bucks for booze!

I tossed the knife in the storm drain and ran back across the street to the convenience store to get my fix. I found my drink of choice and headed to the counter, already trying to twist off the top. I could taste the alcohol on my tongue, even though the bottle was still sealed. I put the bottle on the counter, along with the twenty.

The cashier behind the counter looked up at me and said, "*Sir, your money is no good here"*.

His eyes looked glazed over, sort of like a snake. I stared at him, partially because his eyes were so disturbing, and partially because I didn't understand what he was saying.

"What?" I asked. *"What do you mean it's no good?"*

"*Sir, your money is no good here*," he repeated, pushing the twenty across the counter like he was afraid to touch me.

"I don't understand," I said.

"*I know*," the cashier replied. "*That's why it's no good.*"

I was getting really pissed off. All I wanted was the booze. I grabbed the bottle, planning to run with it out the door, but it stuck to the counter. No matter how hard I pulled, it wouldn't budge.

"*Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Come back when you have what I need*." He motioned towards the door, remaining calm even as his eyes stayed fixed on mine. I'm not really sure why I didn't flip out on him. Instead, I just left. I was furious.

I stood on the sidewalk, which I found now full of people. Through the crowd I could see a bum sitting in the exact spot where the other one was. It looked like the same one! I watched intently as one by one he would ask the passersby for money, and, one by one, they would all hand him a twenty dollar bill. The guy had twenties falling out of his tattered coat and overflowing in his cup! People were frantically pushing through one another to get to this bum, just to give him money. It was as if they were paying him to clear their collective consciences. I stood there trying to make sense of the commotion surrounding him.

Well, I thought, fuck him. *I'm not going to give it back.*

"Nick," the moderator reminded me. "Please, watch your language."

"I started walking down the opposite side of the street, all the while my eyes couldn't look away from what was happening. The bum looked directly at me, and I clutched harder onto the twenty that was in my hand. He slowly shook his head. I wondered what I did not understand. The fear in those people's eyes scared me. Why were they scared of this lowly bum?" I paused, breathing hard.

"Can someone please explain this f-ing dream to me?"

I suddenly realized I hadn't opened my eyes almost the entire time I was telling these strangers the story. I finally opened them and looked out at the room full of addicts. My head was drenched in sweat, and I felt like I was going to hyperventilate. They were all just staring at me. It was like they had no reaction. Didn't they hear what I was saying? Didn't they care?

"Is there anyone who can answer Nick's question?" the moderator asked, looking out into the crowd.

I scanned the crowd. They all seemed to blink in unison, and when their eyes opened, they were glazed over like a snakes, filling me with fear. A small hand went up at the back of the room.

"*I can answer his question, moderator."*

"Please do, sir," the moderator answered.

I could barely see the figure get up and head down the aisle towards him. The room was far darker now, and it looked like fog was rising up off the cement floor.

"Sir," said the bum, standing before me. "My name is Valefar, and I believe I can answer all of your questions."

I was paralyzed with fear of the bum. He was the one from my dreams!

"I…I…I was just wondering if you knew what my dream meant?"

"*My dear Nick, what makes you think it was a dream?"* He laughed a most evil laugh. "*My master put me in charge of the thieves for a reason. I am very good at what I do. Collecting the souls of thieves is easy when you know their weaknesses, their vices. You were easy*." Valefar walked up to the podium and held his hand out. "*Now, give me my twenty back."*

I looked in horror at the demon before me. I slowly reached into my pocket and to my surprise, pulled out a twenty dollar bill. As I placed it in Valefar's hand, I felt hot tears welling up in my eyes.

"Wait!! Why were the people rushing to give you the twenty back?" I cried.

Valefar sighed. *"God has a pesky little law about redemption. A deal my master made with Him some time ago. A useless capitulation, if you ask me."*

The floor in the center of the room fell away, revealing a chasm of burning hot lava. I was frozen in fear at what awaited me.

Valefar turned with a sinister grin and grabbed my hand. "*Lucky for me, there will be no redemption for you*."

Ray J Robbio

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Gateway Drug

Lindsey Beth Goddard

Danny Thornton hated everybody in his high school. *One more year until I can drop out*, he reminded himself before pushing the gymnasium doors open, just wide enough to peek through. The lights were off. The room was empty, aside from the basketball hoops towering above him at each end. Sunlight poured through the high-set windows, shedding its beams across the tiled floor. Danny slipped through the doors and pulled them shut.

There was no P.E. during sixth hour on Friday, and Danny knew it. He also knew there was an exit door behind the coach's office. It was an emergency exit off the short hallway leading to the sports equipment closet. The door had an automatic lock, making it impossible to get in from the outside, but from the inside it opened with ease.

Danny crept through the shadows between the patches of sunlight, the roots of his unkempt hair damp with sweat. His heartbeat thudded in his ears as he glanced back at the gymnasium doors to make sure he was still alone. He was. He wiped the sheen of perspiration from his forehead and told himself he wasn't scared of getting caught. *Scared* wasn't the right word. He was on edge because getting caught would ruin his afternoon.

He passed center court, his footsteps quiet and quick. He couldn't wait to leave, to be free of this place. Sixth hour was the absolute worst. It was Mrs. Prichett's class, and if the subject matter—algebra—wasn't bad enough, the teacher was a real bitch, too. Yesterday she'd forced Danny to take a pop quiz out loud while the entire class listened. It was punishment for nodding off during her lesson. Everyone laughed at Danny when he got several answers wrong and his face turned a deep shade of pink.

Mrs. Prichett, with her tightly wound bun and thin-framed glasses, as if she wanted to *look* the part of *strict school teacher*. Danny clenched his fists at his sides, the memory of his chuckling classmates replaying in his mind, a never ending loop.

He inched past the window of the coach's darkened office. He could see the hallway up ahead. *Almost there*.

Danny jumped back, surprised by his reflection in the dark office window. He quickly recognized his own shaggy brown hair and dark eyes staring back at him. He let out a short, nervous laugh.

No one was around. He'd be outside soon. Away from these assholes.

There were only two people in Danny's life he considered “friends”. One of them sold weed; the other worked at the video game store down the street from his house. Danny socialized with them on a regular basis, but it was only out of necessity. The dealer let him buy whatever small amount of weed his allowance would provide for that week, and the game store clerk hooked him up with coupons and discounts. Sometimes they would shoot the shit for ten or fifteen minutes, but even those guys weren't close to Danny, not really. He didn't have any real friends, and he liked it that way. At least, that's what he told himself. The truth was his acne-covered face and long, dorky nose, combined with his quiet demeanor, made Danny easy prey for the hungry predators that walked the halls of his school.

He rounded the corner of the hallway and hurried to the exit. He reached out, hesitantly, with his fingers above the push bar. He knew from experience there wasn't an alarm on this door. Yet he always felt like there *should* be. Like it was too easy. He held his breath and pushed it open anyway.

He stepped into the sunlight and peered around. He didn't see anyone other than a woman up ahead, jogging, her back turned to Danny. Coast clear.

He angled his face towards the sun and let it warm him. He closed his eyes and listened to the birds chirping, to the cars rolling down the street. Sweet freedom.

He adjusted the book bag on his shoulders and headed for a nearby alley. It was one of his favorite spots—quiet and shady—between a vacant hardware store and a run-down Chinese restaurant. If he came home early and his parents were there, they would start asking questions. So Danny found ways to kill time.

It was a short walk. He arrived at his private alley in less than a few minutes. The air was ripe with the smell of rotting Chinese food from the dumpster, but Danny didn't mind. It would help mask the odor of his smoke.

He shrugged the backpack from his shoulders and leaned against the brick wall. He unzipped the front pocket, reached inside, and retrieved a small plastic bag. The smell of its leafy green contents caused the corner of his mouth to curl into a half-smirk. He dug around in the canvas pocket again until he found his one-hitter and lighter. Danny packed himself a hit. He held a flame to the end of it, took a pull, and let his head fall back

against the dirty brick wall as his lungs absorbed the smoke. Mrs. Prichett and the anger she caused him would be gone in 3,2,1...

“You like to get high, do ya’?” Danny jumped. He almost dropped the one-hitter. There appeared a tall man in a black fedora leaning against the dumpster to his right. The hat matched his outfit, which was black from head to toe. He wore a vest beneath his fancy jacket, but no tie. Danny stuffed the paraphernalia into his back pocket, confusion wrinkling his brow. He was certain he'd been alone mere seconds ago.

“Now, now,” said the man with a wave of his hand. “No need to hide what you've got. I'm cool with it, *dude*.” The word *dude* sounded wrong coming from this man. Even standing in the shadow of the vacant warehouse, he looked old to Danny. *Ancient*. Long, white hair fell from beneath his fedora hat, in sharp contrast to his dark attire.

“What do you want?” Danny eyed the man cautiously as he stepped into the sunlight, drawing near. His skin was so pale that Danny could see the veins in his hands, face, and neck; so dark beneath his alabaster flesh that they resembled cracks in a porcelain figure. Danny shivered.

“I want to offer you a *new* kind of high.” The man flashed a smile full of yellow teeth that were too sharp. *Cat-like*, thought Danny.

The man inched closer and a stench filled the air. It overpowered the dumpster full of old Chinese food, as well as the pot smoke lingering in the breeze. The man was only a few feet away now. He stopped, holding Danny with his stare. Danny's nostrils flared. He tried not to show how the smell made his eyes water and his throat start to gag. It was awful, like sulfur or rotten eggs.

“I'm not interested.” Danny lifted his backpack from the ground. “And I don't have any money.” He tried to move away from his unwelcome intruder, creeping sideways with his ass sliding against the wall, one hand gripping his book bag.

“Oh, but I think you are.” Again, he smiled, with a mouth full of what seemed like monstrous fangs, it sent a tremor through Danny's limbs. The old man fixed Danny in a chilling stare. His eyes, which had appeared brown from a distance, now glimmered with a deep shade of red. “That low-grade garbage you're smoking is terrible for your lungs. It costs too much money, and the effects wear off too quickly. *Am I right*?”

Danny nodded.

“I've got something way better. A different kind of drug. It will take care of anything that's troubling you. Your problems will bother you no more. In fact, this stuff is so good, the first hit is free. Because I know you'll come back for more.”

Danny gulped. “I don't mess around with the hard stuff, man. I'm not a junkie.”

The stranger chuckled. “No need to worry about that. This is a non-addictive experience, like acid or ‘shrooms, only nobody *ever* has a bad trip.” He stared at Danny and repeated the word, *Ever*. The man's eyes no longer held any traces of brown, instead shimmering a vibrant shade of crimson.

“If I take this free sample, will you leave me alone?” Danny's voice was desperate, an octave too high. He wanted to run, but his legs were planted to the ground as if they had grown roots right through the cement.

The man stepped closer, bringing a new wave of the sulfur-like stench with him. Danny felt sick to his stomach. The man reached into the breast pocket of his black dress suit. His spindly white fingers emerged, holding something dark and small between his withered fingertips.

“Hold out your hand,” he instructed. Danny did as he was told. A small, dark blob plopped against his palm. It resembled tar at first, but a wave ran through it that made the substance look a lot like black Jell-O. Danny wasn't sure if it was supposed to be smoked or taken orally, but either way it didn't matter. He wasn't going to take it.

“Now, let me explain how to take it.” The man said, as if reading Danny's thoughts. He slid his hand beneath Danny's upturned palm. The stranger's skin was surprisingly hot, and he wanted to recoil, but didn't. Partly because he was hoping his cooperation would end this encounter very soon, and partly because his body felt frozen in place.

The man held a finger over the small, circular blob, and before Danny could attempt to pull away, he smashed the substance down, grinding it into his skin. Danny regained control of his body, fresh fear overriding whatever spell he'd been under. He pulled his arm away, screaming, “What the hell, man?”

“That's how you take it,” said the man through his rotten grin. Danny raised his hand just in time to see the dark substance disappearing into his pores. He *felt* it seeping into him. It was as cold as the stranger was hot.

The man turned and walked away, and with his back turned to Danny, he uttered, “When you need me, you'll know where to find me.”

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Danny didn't know how long it would take for the effects of the drug to kick in. He opted to hightail it home and hide in his room until he figured out exactly what he'd taken. His parents might be home and question his early arrival, but it was worth the risk.

When he got there, sweaty and still a little panicked, Danny saw that neither car was parked out front. His parents were at work, or maybe even driving home. Either way, the coast was clear for now. He breathed a sigh of relief and ran up the stairs. Locking the door of his bedroom, he popped in a CD and attempted to drown out his thoughts.

Nobody ever has a bad trip. Your problems will bother you no more. The stranger's words echoed through his mind, but he didn't believe any of it. If anybody was going to have a bad trip, it was Danny Thornton. He had dubbed himself The King of Shitty Luck.

Danny waited and waited, but he didn't have a bad trip. In fact, he didn't trip at all. After three hours of hiding in his bedroom, Danny decided that the stranger was nothing more than some old creep who got his jollies off of harassing young boys. He ate his microwaved dinner, shoveling large spoonfuls into his mouth. He was tired, unusually tired for this hour.

He went back up to his room, layed down on his bed and soon Danny Thorton fell fast asleep.

In his dreams, Danny stood in front of a house that looked familiar, but he didn't know why. It was a split-level home of moderate size. The second story was done in white siding, the bottom level in decorative brick. Black shutters framed the windows. Only one light was on, illuminating the upstairs window like a rectangular star against the dark, moonless night.

A single tree stood in the yard. Its limbs were so twisted it appeared as though the branches grew in knots. The tree was the only interesting thing about the yard, with its freshly mowed grass and pruned shrubs lining the porch.

Danny yawned. A thought occurred to him. *Why am I yawning in a dream? Hey! How do I know that I'm dreaming?*

Unlike other dreams, which felt real until he woke up, Danny was somehow *aware* that he was asleep in his bed, that his mind had conjured this entire thing up. He frowned. Of all the sexy scenarios his hormone-driven mind could have whipped up, of all the girls he pictured naked in the hallways of school, why was he standing in front of a plain-looking house on an average suburban street?

He shrugged. There was only one way to find out. For some reason, his unconscious mind had brought him here--to this house. He didn't know how to wake himself up, so he might as well get on with it and do something. He crossed the lawn and stepped onto the concrete patio. Danny tried the door knob, but the door was locked.

A strange voice filled his mind. "*Try the back door*," it suggested. He smelled the sulfur stench before he saw the man in black standing on the lawn. A fedora hat atop his long, thinning white hair; the man extended a spindly finger, pointing the way. He spoke in a hushed tone that somehow was crystal clear in Danny's ears. "*She forgot to lock the back door*."

Danny stood on the porch and considered his options. Maybe the drug was finally taking effect on his brain. Maybe he was tripping in his dreams. This certainly didn't feel like any dream he'd ever had. It felt different, more like an alternate reality—one where Danny was *aware* of his dreaming.

To make sure it *was* a dream, Danny concentrated all his thoughts on one idea: a two-headed squirrel. Soon enough, a furry little two-headed squirrel scampered across the grass. It stopped, its four beady eyes staring in different directions. It raised an acorn to both of its mouths, allowing each one a turn to nibble. *Okay, now I know I'm dreaming*, he thought. He looked up to where the ghastly man had been standing, but there was nothing there but an empty lawn.

Danny was growing bored with this dream, or trip—whichever it was—and he was eager to get on with some action. Besides, what could possibly go wrong? This wasn't real.

He headed around the side of the house, dropping down low when he came to a large window. He crawled passed it and stood. Walking quickly, he stuck to the shadows and avoided the light of the street lamps. Even in this dream world he knew that a nosy neighbor could easily spoil his mission. Of course, he had no idea what that mission actually *was,* but it didn't matter. Danny felt compelled to continue.

A chorus of crickets serenaded him as he crept through the dark like a burglar. He came to the back door and tried the knob, a little shocked to discover that the creepy old man had been right. It was unlocked, and swung soundlessly open.

Beyond the door lied a dining room with hardwood floors and posh furniture. The room had a modern, stylish look, even in the darkness. His eyes had adjusted well enough to see clearly. Or maybe that was the drug heightening his senses. Danny couldn't stop thinking about the tar-like substance and how it had seeped into his pores. This dream felt so vivid, so *real*; he was certain he was tripping in his sleep.

He tiptoed through the house. All was quiet, except for the white noise of the air conditioner and the heavy drumming of Danny's heart. *Why am I here?* He wondered.

Artwork decorated the walls. Nothing special. Just the generic stuff you could find at K-Mart or Target. He passed a hanging mirror opposite the decorated wall.

Then stopped.

He gasped and spun around to face the glass. Nothing was reflected in the mirror. That is, *he* was not reflected. The wall behind him was there, along with the ugly artwork. But no Danny.

He lifted an arm and waved his hand, the way he'd seen countless movie characters do while confronting an empty mirror. Nothing changed. *I'm invisible. Holy shit! I'm invisible!*

Adrenaline coursed through Danny's veins bringing a new-found confidence. To think he had been sneaking through the yard, so afraid of getting caught, and all along he had this unknown special power. Yes, *power*. That's exactly what it was, because Danny felt very powerful indeed. *I can do anything*, he thought.

Looking around the room, he noticed a framed photograph hanging a few feet from where he stood. He stepped closer. All at once, he knew why the house had looked so familiar. A middle-aged couple smiled at him from the photo. They stood in front of the house with its white siding on the top, brick on the lower level, and black shutters flanking the windows. The tree with twisted branches stuck out of the ground just behind them. It was a young, wispy tree in the picture.

He knew this photo. It was the same one Mrs. Prichett kept on her desk. Danny had glanced over at it many times, as he was forced to stand in

front of the class for some form of humiliation or another. It was hard not to notice the large 8 X 10 picture towering over everything else on her desk.

In the photo, Mrs. Prichett and her late husband beamed. He held her close, his muscular hand wrapped around her waist. Danny suspected that her husband's sudden passing was the reason why Mrs. Prichett was such a bitch, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was how she made him feel. And she inspired him with only one feeling: a cold hatred than burned through his veins as if his blood had been spiked with dry ice.

"*Just think of what she's done to you*," the voice whispered in his head. Danny glanced around the room, expecting to see the man in black standing there, thin white hair and alabaster skin glowing in the shadows. But no one was there. Only the voice in his head saying, "*She let them all laugh at you.*"

Danny's hands trembled with rage. He balled them into fists. His adrenaline surged. An intense fury blossomed in the core of his being, growing larger by the second, filling him with such hatred until only one thought remained: *revenge*.

Danny approached the French door near the dining room table. He peered through. The kitchen lay just ahead.

He hurried to the counter and opened a drawer. Nothing but dish towels and sponges. He slammed it shut, then opened another—*slam*, then another. *Slam*. He found pencils. *No*. Scissors. *Maybe*. Silverware. *Definitely not*. He needed something sharp. Something with a good grip, because his hands were shaking faster than a trading card on the spokes of a bicycle wheel.

Otherwise, he felt good.—somehow confident, ready to release the pent-up emotion that rattled him from spine to fingers. He continued rifling through the kitchen. After half a dozen drawers were slammed, a shaky voice called from the other room, "Hello? Who is there? I am on the phone with 9-1-1, so whoever you are, you better leave!"

Shit. Danny hadn't considered that being invisible didn't mean Mrs. Prichett couldn't *hear* him. He'd been making a racket in the kitchen, alerting her to his presence. Now he wouldn't be able to sneak up on her in bed, like he'd been hoping to do.

He stopped moving for a moment. He stood very still, biting his lip. And that's when he saw a wooden block sitting atop the island counter. The handles of a dozen knives jutted out from its surface, calling his name.

Danny…Danny, come play with us. So he did. He selected the largest one, squeezing it so tight that all traces of blood left his knuckles.

He bolted through the French door and scanned the area. A doorway across the room led to a small foyer. He hurried to it and glanced to his left, where a staircase led to the second floor. A panicked Mrs. Prichett sat halfway up the stairs with the phone pressed against her worried face. She locked eyes with the knife, but not with Danny. No, she couldn't see Danny at all. A maniacal laugh erupted from his throat, and for a moment he wondered—could she hear his laughter? Could she hear him taunting her? He hoped so.

"Oh my God," she breathed, no doubt wondering why a butcher knife from her kitchen was floating in the air, angled and shaking as if it were held by an invisible madman. And it was. Danny grinned.

He charged up the stairs. The woman shrieked and was almost to her feet when he jumped her. The side of her face hit the corner of the stair. There was a crunching noise as the bones in her cranium fractured. Danny liked it. He wondered what other noises she might make when the real punishment began.

He raised the knife and brought it down onto her back, purposely avoiding the spine. He wanted her to feel this, all of it. She screamed and wheezed as the blade punctured her lung. He smiled and yanked the knife from her back.

Danny brought it down again, plunging deep into the muscles just below her shoulder. She shrieked and pleaded as she bucked wildly, like a bull at the rodeo.

She managed to thrust her elbow backward and connect with Danny's chin. It hurt a lot, but the pain gave him a second wind. He wanted to see her face. He wanted to watch the light fade from her eyes.

He couldn't flip her over with the butcher knife clutched in his hand. So he dropped it. Why did he need it, anyway? The bitch couldn't even *see* him!

He gripped her roughly by the arm and turned her over. She was crying. Her glasses sat crooked on her face. They were bent into an odd position on the side of her head that had slammed the stair. A greenish bruise was already forming there.

Her eyes pleaded with the empty air, looking not at Danny, but past him. Nothing new. Things had always been this way between them. She

never really saw Danny Thornton, no; she merely gazed through him as if he were a nobody.

He wrapped his hands around her throat and squeezed as tight as he could manage. Her eyes grew wide behind her broken glasses. She tried to jerk her head from side to side, but managed a barely noticeable shake. Her arms flailed as she threw punches at random, unable to see her attacker and too frenzied to aim, even if she could.

She made no sound at all. She couldn't. Her windpipe was pinched by Danny's thumbs. The blows softened as her arms lost muscle power. Her eyes stared blankly. She was barely fighting at all now. An eerie shade of lavender had washed over her face. Her lips were deathly pale, trying to form some semblance of her final words. Mrs. Prichett and the anger she caused Danny to feel would be gone in 3,2,1...

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Danny woke up and stretched. He couldn't remember what he had dreamed about last night, but he knew it had been good, because he *felt* good. In fact, he felt like he'd been asleep for days and had awakened to a brand new life. He knew that wasn't the case. For one, it was impossible, and secondly, his cell phone told him the time and date. He'd been asleep for nine hours. Still, he felt somehow different this morning. Better.

The sun was shining, and Danny had time to spare, so he decided to walk to school. He didn't want to snap out of his good mood. The jerks on the bus would make sure that he did. They would see him smiling, or walking with a bounce in his step, and they'd take that good mood away from him. Simply because they could.

Danny didn't head straight to the school. He decided to savor this rare feeling of happiness before it was inevitably crushed. He walked with no particular direction in mind, unconsciously letting his legs lead the way. He passed a flower garden, a small dog yapping behind a wooden fence, a little girl riding a pink tricycle. In the distance, a lawn mower grunted and came to life. Danny took it all in as he walked, on and on, simply enjoying himself. He turned down whichever street appealed to him most, thinking, *so what if I'm late for school*?

He came upon a house with white siding on the top, brick deco walls on the bottom, and black shutters framing the windows. A police car sat;

empty, at the end of the driveway, another one parked at the curb. The cement porch was lined with yellow plastic strips that read “CRIME SCENE” in bold, black font. A figure in blue passed the open threshold of the house.

Danny's blood ran cold. A slide show of violent images flashed through his mind as he stared blankly at the yellow tape dancing in the wind. He saw the knife plunge into Mrs. Prichett's back, blood shining on the blade as he removed it. He saw it slice into her shoulder, saw her flesh rip open, her clothes becoming sticky and red. He saw his hands around her neck. The woman's eyes pleading behind broken glasses. The lifeless, glassy eyes looking through him.

But—it had all been a dream, right? Just a dream? Danny smiled. It was a dream. He was certain of that. But it was also something *more*. Those things he had done—they had really *happened* somehow.

Danny turned and headed back. He knew, now, why his feet had carried him here. His senses were heightened. Foreign chemicals still lingered in the tissue of his brain, the vestiges of a strange, black substance. As he quickened his pace, taking the streets that would lead him to school, he thought maybe—just maybe—his good mood might last.

Danny arrived at school one hour late. He got a tardy pass from the office and made his way to his locker. The halls were abuzz with gossip. The news of Mrs. Prichett's death was being whispered from ear to ear. A few students even talked right out loud. “Stabbed *and* choked,” he overheard them say.

His ego grew a little larger as he realized *everyone* was talking about the murder. Students gathered around the drinking fountain, or trading one book for another at their locker, pondering the gruesome crime scene, wondering how gory it had been. Some were sad, some indifferent, and some actually looked relieved. Danny guessed that the recently widowed Mrs. Prichett had been hard on more students than just him.

He was filled with a smug satisfaction as he spun the combination on his locker and yanked it open. *He* had done that. Danny Thornton. *He* had killed mean Mrs. Prichett and silenced her bitchy tongue forever.

His ego swelled, and Danny decided to try the impossible today. He decided to talk to a girl. He spotted Lisa Hargraves coming down the hall. She wasn't the prettiest girl in school, but even Danny's burgeoning self-esteem didn't trick him into thinking he stood a chance with the popular

girls. Lisa was somewhere in between, and, even better, she was alone. It was easier to approach girls when they were outside of their herd. Not that Danny had ever tried before.

He closed his locker and swooped in beside the girl. “Hey, Lisa,” he said. She had light blue eyes, brown hair, and a plain face with lots of freckles, but she was cute enough that Danny had caught himself looking at her a few times. “Can I walk you to class?”

Lisa stopped and turned to him, crinkling her nose in disgust. She rolled her eyes. “Yeah right, Danny, in your dreams.” She started to walk again, but Danny stayed behind. Blood rushed to his face and neck, and he knew he was turning pink. But he didn't care. All he cared about was the sudden ache in his chest. Lisa's words had pierced right through his heart. Her rejection of him hurt more than any bully in the past. It stung so badly, he could only think of one response.

“You know what?” he said. “That's a deal, Lisa. I'll see you in my dreams!”

Danny laughed. A few classmates shot him a scrutinizing sneer. The warning bell rang, shattering the silence that had formed all around him. Everyone had seen Lisa take him down a peg and heard his crazy reply.

Fuck them, he thought. *Fuck them all!* Danny Thornton hated everyone in his school.

He would see them in his dreams, tonight and the next night, just as soon as he found the man in black.

“*When you need me, you'll know where to find me,*” he had said. And Danny *did* know where to find him, and he wanted more of that strange, black substance. No matter what the cost.

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A Daffodil or Tulip Shan't Compare

Justin Tate

A daffodil or tulip shan't compare

To the bounteous beauty you possess,

For no blossom or petal is as fair

Or worthy of my beating heart's obsess.

Divine-driven or deep in dreamer's sleep,

Preparing a meal or engaged in book,

My longing for you becomes the more deep;

Nothing you do could taint the way you look.

But alas this marriage comes with distance,

Those petite, gentle hands I've yet to hold!

For years I have left our romance to chance

And today is my time to be so bold.

For how could I ever become your beau,

If I only see you through your window?

Justin Tate

Justin Tate's poetry has appeared in multiple literary journals, webzines and anthologies. His first collection – The Death Sonneta – is available now on Amazon.com

Special Delivery

William Holden

July 1, 2013

My Dearest Joseph,

I bet you are surprised to hear from me. Did you think that I wasn't going to be able to find you? You should know better than that. No matter where you go, I shall always be there with you. Don't you know by now that we will be joined together forever? It's who I am. It's what I am. It's who we are. I know what you must be thinking, but please don't overreact – I know how you can be. I think it's time that we both stop playing games; accept the fact that we need to be together - you and I, the two parts that will make us whole once more.

By now, you must know how I feel about you, and that I would do anything for you – for us. How could you not, after everything we've been through together? Don't you feel me the way I feel you? Have you tried so hard to distance yourself from me that you've lost the connection we once shared? Don't you remember, Joseph? There was a time we were there for one another, no matter what life handed us? I want that again, Joseph. I want—no, we need to be there for each other, now more than ever. We need that connection again. I want to hold onto you and never let you go. That is why I cannot give up on us. You must feel it, as I do. There is something missing in each of us, something that cannot be satisfied by any other means - except by reuniting.

You need me, Joseph, just as much as I need you, and I'm not going anywhere until I can convince you otherwise. I can't be anywhere else but here. We need to be reunited—forever. I know what you're thinking - that I am no one. That all of this is some sort of illusion or distant memory that you can ignore and move on without. But you would be wrong, Joseph. You above all others should know that. You just have to let me prove it to you. I am not the troublemaker that others convinced you I am. The only moments of instability I have, come when you deny what we both want: to be as one. You must want that too. I don't understand why you continue to act as though you are scared of me. Have I ever done anything to hurt you? Look, I don't like to bring up the past, but let me be honest here for one moment. I'm more clear-headed than most of the people you've been involved with.

Whether you want to admit it or not, you know, deep down that what I'm saying is true.

Do you need me to remind you of Debra, the woman who not only stole your heart, but stole tens of thousands of dollars from you before taking off? Oh, and what about Justin? Lord, that poor tweaked-out meth addict was a mess. He slept with anything in order to get his next fix. Shall I go on? No, I can't. It's too unpleasant for me to remember the hurt and pain others have caused you, because it hurt me, too—all the lost sleep, worrying about you back then. You know that if I could find those sick, mean-spirited people, I would make them pay for hurting you – for hurting us. Oh, and pay they would. Nothing would be too cruel for those who have made us suffer, because when you ache, so do I. I'm sorry for my digression. I must not dwell on the past. We need to look toward the future now – our future. A future we will have together, because it was meant to be. I know you feel it, you just don't want to believe it, but you will, oh, you will...

It hurts me that our relationship has been so one-sided. I've asked you to communicate with me, but you ignore my requests as if I don't exist. Trust me, I do. You may think that your silence is some signal to me that you don't know who I am. We both know that to be a lie. A lie fabricated by those who are trying to keep us apart. I know that you've seen me. It's impossible to think otherwise, as I am wherever you are. Every morning, back in Boston, you took the 7:36 Redline train from Porter Square to Central Square. You walked the short half block to your job at the Health Center. We've had lunch together more times than I can count. I've even walked you home to make sure you made it there safely when the trains weren't running.

There were days when you sat outside at Harvard Square, eating your lunch. You always sat on the cement walls facing out in the direction of the river. You are an observer, a people watcher, just like me. There were times when our eyes met. They were brief, passing moments as you window shopped on your way back to work, but those are the points in time that I always hold onto, because in those instants you acknowledged me, that I existed, that we were still connected.

July 3, 2013
Joseph,

It is not quite four in the morning. The sun has yet to waken a new day, and you are still curled up in your sheets, asleep. As on many of the nights since you shut me out of your life, I have not been able to rest. Apparently, your dismissal of me has not had the same effect on you as it has on me.

You look so peaceful, lying there with a slight smile upon your face. Times like this make me realize that my determination to bring us together is what I must accomplish, no matter how much you try to resist our reunion. That is why I decided to spend the night, last night, by your side.

Yes, that's right. I spent the night right here by your side as you slept. Before I go on, I must warn you how careless you are with your own safety. You left the sliding glass door to your balcony open last night when you went to bed. You must be more careful. Do you have any idea how many sick and disturbed people are out there, waiting to take advantage of someone like you? Thankfully, you have me to watch out for you. Since you dismissed me all those years ago, I now find myself outside of things – outside of you – outside of us. I'm always on the outside looking in because you won't have it any other way. I sit in the dark recesses of your life and watch as you go about your routine. I want to be a part of your life again, to be a part of you, but knowing that you continue to shun me as if I am not good enough for you – if you only knew the truth.

The pain you cause me is enough to send anyone into the depths of despair and desperation. You are lucky that I am the strong and giving one in this life. If I were anything less, I'm not sure what your coldness would do to me—or to you. Again I stray. Where was I? Yes, your carelessness. Last night I noticed you didn't lock the door. I took that as an invitation for me to spend the night with you. So I did. It was one of the most moving and profound nights I've experienced since my departure.

I watched you for hours. I lost myself in the rise and fall of your chest and stomach as you slept. Your breathing through parted lips sang me a sweet lullaby. The smell of your body, damp with the night's sweat, was almost more than I could bear. I had forgotten how rich and sweet a true body could smell. I want to be a part of that scent, Joseph; to be a part of you.

There was a full moon last night. I remembered how much you hated sleeping with the curtains open, but there you were last night, the window wide open. I was thankful for that subtle change in your sleeping habit, as it

allowed me to watch the pale rays of the moon decorate and paint our near hairless bodies. It brought back such wonderful memories for me. I only wish you could have been awake so that we might have shared that moment together, as we had so many times, before you forced me out of our life. I'm not angry with you. That would be like being angry with myself, and that type of emotion would only be counterproductive. Besides, our time has come. You can't stop fate, Joseph. Tomorrow night our strange union will be complete, and then you will understand everything.

Until then…

July 5, 2013

Why do you continue to play these games with me? The angst you cause me is burrowing a hole deep in my chest. Shall I just lie down on your floor and allow you to take a hand drill, cranking the sharp metal drill bit into me to shred whatever's left? Will you love me then, in that final moment? Will that moment of triumph over me get you off? No, we will be one, once again.

I returned last night as promised. I always keep my promises where you are concerned. It was supposed to be our night, independence for the rest of the nation, but our final uniting. Do my words of love and devotion mean anything to you?

Closing off your balcony is one thing, but to cover up the glass doors so that I can't even see you is just beyond my comprehension. Do you think your actions were going to stop me? By now you must know what is happening. Yes, having our balcony shut off from me hurts, but that doesn't mean that I cannot get to you. My being here again while you sleep proves that. It's your coldness that burns me, but that wound will only make our bond grow stronger. Yes, I am hurt, but I am here with you, and always will be. Your selfish motives that cause such distasteful states will only give me strength to carry on the fight, for I know you are worth it – we are worth it. Oh yes, the two of us together again will be worth all the pain we both must endure.

I shall be everywhere now. You will no longer have a moment without me. When you leave for work, know that I will be there with you. When you take a shit after lunch in that crystal clean bathroom at work, listen closely because I shall be in the stall next to you. When you have drinks

with your coworkers, look around, and know that I shall be there, too. You'll recognize me if you open your eyes and realize that we will be one.

You cannot shut me out of your life any longer. I will not allow you to do that to us. How can I make you see that this is what God wanted for us? We were placed upon this earth to be together—to help each other, to console each other in times of grief, and to love one another in times of happiness. Our time is coming Joseph. Do not fight this, for it will only prolong the agony, and shortening the days we have left together.

July 8, 2013

It has been three days since I've last come to you. Three days of agony for me as I watched you go about your life as if I didn't exist. How can you treat me this way? Maybe the better question is; how can you live with yourself, knowing the suffering that you are causing us? I'm the one who loves you more than life itself! I'm the dying twig and you, my dear Joseph, have become the strong brutal wind that has ripped me from the root of my existence, breaking me in two.

Last night was it for me as I watched you leave. I walked down the street with you, close enough to smell the odors of your body mingling with the lingering cologne and deodorant which you doused yourself in that morning. I followed you into Taste, your favorite restaurant—I had hoped it would become our regular hangout. You took a seat at one of the tables by the window. I lingered in the darkened corner, where you wish I would remain. I watched you sit there with an expectant look upon your face. When he walked in, I realized what that look was about. You stood and gave him a brief hug, not wanting to make it known to others, in the restaurant, that they were dining aside two queer boys. That's what you get for moving to the Midwest, in order to escape me. You have surrounded yourself with a city that doesn't want to know you exist, where people would rather see you dead than alive. I'm beginning to see their point, but…back to last night.

I remained alone in the corner while you laughed and enjoyed the company of another man. Do you know how that made me feel? Wishing that you were dining with me, that I could make you laugh as he did? You gave each other a quick kiss outside on the darkened sidewalk after dinner and went your separate ways. I knew you were going home alone, and that

tonight would be the night when we would be together forever. I have lost you. I see that now. There is nothing left for me to do.

I know you have spent your life scared of our bond. My letters, my gifts, are all proof that they were wrong – there is nothing to fear because I do exist, or at least I did, until you allowed the doctors and psychotherapists to convince you otherwise. I need you, just as you need me. They said I was the unborn twin, the one that didn't survive because I was rotten. They convinced you that I was poison in your system, a parasite that needed exterminating. They even had you believing that you could not survive if you allowed me to co-exist with you. You shut me out of your life—our life. That is what started all of this. Their lies are what brought us this far tonight. You see, I cannot survive without you. Therefore, I cannot allow you to go on without me.

I'm sorry that you will never get to read this last letter. Perhaps it might have been the one to persuade you to allow me to live – to allow us to coexist. I know better now. One more night, one more letter, would not have made any difference. You destroyed us when you let them go to work on you. They filled your head with their medicines and therapies. I tried to make you see the truth. I begged you not to listen to them, but you were always the weaker of the two of us.

You pretended I didn't exist. I only wish you could have admitted to yourself and to me that you had seen me. All the times you looked into the mirror, or saw our reflection in a storefront window, you never questioned the different colored eyes. Your left is ice blue. Your right is green, and mine, just the opposite. Didn't you see me in those moments? Or were you too far gone to care? Were you so afraid to admit the truth that you ignored the obvious?

You look so peaceful, lying in your bed, naked, just as you did every night since they took me from you. The only difference is that tonight you can no longer ignore me. You cannot act out against me, close me out of your life, and pretend that I am no one to you. Tonight we shall be together once again. There is nothing you or anyone else can do to stop me now. Our bodies will once again become one. I shall be there for you and you will now be there for me. Didn't I once say that, in time, you would understand that we were meant to be together? It's too bad we both had to die, in order for you to understand. I did promise you that I would love you forever. Now I shall keep my promise—which is more than you ever did.

Sweet dreams, my little brother.

William Holden

is an award-winning author of more than sixty short stories, and five books. *A Twist of Grimm* (Lethe Press), a queer retelling of the Brother's Grimm fairy tales was a finalist for the 2010 Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Erotica. His collection of horror stories, *Words to Die By* (Bold Strokes Books), received second place in the 2012 Rainbow Book Awards, and was a finalist for the American Library Associations, Foreword Book Award for Best Horror of 2012. *Secret Societies* (Bold Strokes Books), his first novel set in 18th century London during the time of the sodomy trials, was a finalist for the 2012 Lambda Literary Award. *Clothed in Flesh* (Bold Strokes Books), a collection of 18th century horror was released in 2013. You can visit him online at www.williamholdenwrites.com

MacKenzie's Rose

Rie Sheridan Rose

She stood on the edge of the windswept cliff—the stiff seaward breeze tearing at her hair and cloak—eyes straining to the horizon in the first gray light of dawn. But again… He did not come She was tempting fate. Every day the air was a little brighter, the angry red sun a little closer to bursting over the rim of the world before she would abandon her vigil and seek shelter from its flame. And still, he did not come….

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The centuries melted away like candle wax. The bleak seacoast transformed into a high-dollar tourist trap, but her headland remained inviolate behind her boundless fortune. She cut her waist-length hair; exchanged her cloak and billowing skirts for a pants suit and duster; but still she pushed the sunrise, scanning the sea for a ghostly sail that would not come.

Her manservant came to the edge of the widow's walk, standing respectfully beside it, a single perfect rose held delicately in his twisted fingers.

"Madame, come away. The dawn...,"

MacKenzie left the sentence unfinished as he had for decades She had watched as he blossomed, with his roses, from stripling boy to flowering manhood, then withered at last to this dying weed; the thin gray wraith now standing by her

A faithful familiar just as his father had been before him, and his father's father before that, stretching backward, in a long unbroken forest of MacKenzies whose roots were antediluvian.

She seemed to vaguely recall a time when she herself had been MacKenzian in origin, a distant cousin or some such branch of the family tree, but it had been long ago and now ceased to make any difference. She was simply "Madame," or "Ms. Stoker" to her few acquaintances.

She had no friends, no real friends

Except MacKenzie.

He lay one gnarled hand gently on her arm and slowly drew her toward the safe harbor of her mansion fortress.

It rather amused her to consider the fact that her dawn vigil might well be the death of her yet, as the sun caught her, trying to shore up MacKenzie's stubborn pride and match her own pace with his faltering steps.

Once, long ago, at the pinnacle of his manhood, when the aching loneliness had become particularly wearisome, she had offered MacKenzie her eternal favor. He had refused sweetly, willing enough to provide a brief distraction, but not to share an eternity. That day, she wept...and her satin pillow had been stained with blood.

Today, she curled her arm through that of her loyal servant, sometimes lover, and dearest friend, and now aided him more than he assisted her. She would lose him soon, and there would be no MacKenzie in the house for the first time in centuries.

He had been a MacKenzie, as well. In fact, it had been his youngest brother who had brought her the news of his sailing, and stayed to become the first MacKenzie.

But this one, admittedly her favorite, for he had once looked oh-so-much like his wandering ancestor,—alas, was the last. He had never married, despite her urging. Although he would not become her immortal companion, throughout his life he had been her champion, and refused to share either his responsibilities or his bed with another.

And yet, he always called her "Madame," as he had been properly taught. Never "dearest," or "beloved," or even "Rose," as she had been christened. It did not matter overly much. She could hear his undying love in every syllable he uttered. It was comforting to have some semblance of stability in this one thing at least.

The day was brightening unbearably around them. She could feel the exposed skin of her face and hands begin to redden as the thinned fluid within her veins was drawn toward the surface, like liquid moths to a giant flame.

MacKenzie shoved her roughly toward the covered entryway with a burst of savage strength. "Go inside, you fool!" he hissed with uncharacteristic venom. "You will not sacrifice yourself for me! Not while I live."

She ducked inside the sheltering doorway, stunned by the unexpected vehemence of his outburst. The pain quickly ebbed inside the shadowed sanctuary of the windowless interior. As she waited anxiously for him to

make his shuffling way into the dwelling they had shared for three-quarters of a century.

She clutched the stem of his ritualistic rose between nerveless fingers, heedless of the pricking thorns. Consumed with a fluttering panic, she wondered what she would do when the day finally arrived that he did not come to awaken her with his token rose, and the wicker birdcage containing her breakfast.

The doves had been his idea. She had remarked wistfully one evening about the aching hunger that always assailed her upon arising. The next night he had brought her a large dove to assuage her thirst. It was just enough to take the first edge off the knifing hunger pangs so that she could think clearly enough to coherently plan her evening, instead of rushing headlong into the darkness to indiscriminately feed. Pleased with the success of his venture, MacKenzie had built the dovecote immediately, and she secretly thought the birds did much to ease his solitary days. The advantages that were thus derived from the nightly tidbits were immeasurable for them both.

She found it both easier and more difficult to feed in this brave new world of theirs, and clear planning was a valuable asset. The streets teemed with people at all hours of the night. Many of them were homeless drifters, willing to drop their guard for a decent meal and a place to sleep. She was more than happy to oblige their desires...and MacKenzie stoically weighted the bodies for the sea's tithe.

She especially enjoyed herself on those evenings when she could find a roughly handsome loner, slightly the worse for drink, and bring him home to play with before she fed. On those occasions, she took her time, giving him her body in exchange for his blood, as she had once been known to do for MacKenzie. But she had no necessity to rein herself in with these nameless drifters as she had with MacKenzie, and the alcohol and orgasm each added their own unique spice to the cataclysmic rush of draining the last life essence from a terrified victim.

Of course, there were those few mistakes where the night's dinner had not been drunk, but stoned, and the drugs had given her daymares—or worse, kept her from sleep altogether. On those dreadful occasions, MacKenzie would sit with her throughout the daylight hours, rocking her in his strong embrace as she shook with the reaction caused by the pollutants in her bloodstream.

And worst of all had been the solitary instance when she had unwittingly chosen an AIDS sufferer as prey, and the tainted blood had acted like a poison in her system. She had almost died a second time...but MacKenzie had compelled her to purge the diseased meal and then slit his wrist and made her feed until he had himself passed out from the blood loss. It had taken every ounce of willpower she possessed to respect his wishes and not complete the process. She could so easily have brought him across without his consent. But he was so like *her* MacKenzie, that she could not bring herself to force upon him, what he would not freely accept.

That had been her folly all those years ago.... She had tried to coerce her sea captain to take her gift, and he had sailed away while she slept, never to return.

She remembered their final meeting as if it were yesterday. His earnest expression as he spoke of the sea and his yearning to explore the mysteries beyond its borders had torn her heart.

"Come away with me, my beloved Rose—" he had coaxed, his skin almost translucent from her attentions. She had brought him to the very brink of the abyss before he had pleaded with her to wait. "We will sail the oceans of the world together."

"While I feed upon your crew to live?" Lips brushing a cheek as pale as her own, she had let the tips of her fangs graze the base of his throat teasingly. "Stay with me, MacKenzie. I will make you immortal."

He had clutched her to him then, crushing her until she near-swooned with the ache of it. "I promise you, love. On my name and sacred honor, I will come home one day to accept your gracious gift—"

Eyes glowing crimson, she had replied with words which haunted her daily.... "—Or may you never return whilst I live!"

She had frightened him with her intensity. She had seen the change in him immediately; seen the naked terror lurking in the depths of his eyes like a leviathan.

He had sailed with the morning tide whilst she slept within her darkened fortress, fleeing from her to the safety of sunlit waters, and passing forever out of her ken. She had awaited his return, standing her vigil every dawn for centuries...but all in vain. The ship might have sailed off the very edge of the world for all she knew. Not even rumors had filtered back.

And now, her last fragile link to him was dying. She heard the fumble of clumsy fingers on the knob and hurried to draw MacKenzie inside.

His face was ashen as he fell through the doorway to collapse in her arms. With the preternatural strength of her kind, she swept the old man up like an ailing child and carried him into her private sanctum.

Tenderly she lay him down amidst the satin bedclothes and sank upon the bed beside him. "You must rest, MacKenzie, Regain your strength."

"No, Madame," he murmured gently, his voice a reedy whisper of sound. "Not this time." He lifted a frail hand with rice-paper skin to stroke her lifeless cheek. "I tried to make up for what he did to you, Madame. I tried. But I knew that I could never truly replace him. That was why I refused your gift, when I wanted so desperately to take it. I could easily have spent eternity at your side, young and free...but it would have been *his* face you were seeing, even though I wore it."

Words of protest sprang to her lips—to die unborn when she realized that he was right. At the time that she had made the offer, what he was saying had been true. He had been the mirror image of her gallant seaman, and she had selfishly sought to recapture what she had lost.

But as time went on, and his features had passed the captain's brash youth and matured into a character all their own, she had come to know a deeper emotion than the fiery passion that was three parts lust. Until her daily existence had become defined by his presence. Why had she never dared to ask again? Without him, she would lose her soul.

"I offer it again..." she whispered, rivulets of crimson ribboning the alabaster silk mask of her face.

He shook his head weakly. "No, Madame. That would be fair to neither of us. I could not spend eternity trapped in this husk beside your radiance, and you would come to resent being weighed by such an anchor. I only wish I was leaving you a new MacKenzie to take my place... but I could never bear the thought of giving to another what I could not give to you."

"Please—don't leave me alone," she begged him, her cheeks now smeared scarlet with the blood of tears dashed impatiently aside.

"Alas, Madame...forgive me...for once, I fear, I must disobey your orders." He was racked by a fit of coughing, and his eyes closed.

She feared the end had come—before she had gotten a chance to share the startling revelation that had so dazzled her a moment before.

“No!” she cried in anguish, her voice ringing against the stone walls.

His eyes fluttered open one last time, and he visibly gathered his remaining resources. “I must tell you something,” he breathed urgently, his voice the merest ghost of sound. Only a creature with the supernatural hearing of a vampire could have understood the gasped words.

She bent closer, slipping an arm under his gaunt shoulders to raise him a little and ease his labored breathing. “What is it, dear one?” Her own speech was halting, and choked with the blood of unshed tears.

“All my life...I have dreamed of the day when I could tell you at last...how very much...I love you...Rose—” It was the first—and last—time he ever spoke her name aloud. Giving a final sigh, a peaceful smile stealing upon his lips, MacKenzie died in her arms.

For hours, Rose sat unmoving in the midst of the rumpled bed, cradling his body as if it were a sleeping babe. She thought of all the wasted centuries...the hopeless vigil on the headland...the regretful loss of the one man who had ever loved her above himself.

She was so tired. Perhaps it was time to rest at last.

She lay MacKenzie tenderly upon the bed, brushing a wayward lock of silver from his brow with a lingering caress. From a cedar chest in the corner of her luxurious chamber, she shook out the hooded cape and flowing skirts she had worn the night she bid her sea captain farewell. A little the worse for moths and the stale centuries...but it would serve her purpose. Thoughtfully, she dressed, savoring each movement. This was the last time she would arrange her hair. The last time she would fasten a cloak.

The last time....

She bent and lifted MacKenzie into her arms once more. It was only a hollow shell she carried now, but she felt she owed him at least this much. Taking one last look around the sumptuous bedchamber, Rose bared her fangs in a mocking grin. Let the scavengers fight over who would claim it. That would be a scene to see!

Humming softly under her breath, she paused only long enough to scoop up the wilted rose from the floor of the hallway where she had dropped it that morning. She tucked MacKenzie’s final token behind one ear. Taking a deep breath, Rose plunged out into the shimmering sea of sunlight.

Eyes squinted to mere slits against the blaze of light unseen for centuries; she could feel the blistering pain begin as her unnatural blood

began to boil beneath her skin. By sheer will alone, she staggered with her precious burden to the headland, thin wisps of smoke trailing about her in a personal fogbank. As she stared out over the empty ocean, as she had for so many uncountable dawns, she sank to her knees, unable to stand under the paralyzing weight of the all-consuming pain.

"I love you, MacKenzie," she whispered through cracked lips. And, for the first time, it was not to the captain to whom she mouthed the words.

***

A pillar of ash retained the figure of a woman for a brief instant, then collapsed around the corpse of a man, a single rose resting on his sunken chest. Far out to sea, a ghostly sail materialized on the horizon. Finally released from the promise he had been unable to keep, Captain MacKenzie could return home at last.

Rie Sheridan Rose

has been writing professionally for over ten years. She has published 6 novels, 1 short story collection, 2 chapbooks of collected stories, and 5 poetry collections as well as contributing to numerous anthologies. She also wrote lyrics for Marc Gunn's "Don't Go Drinking With Hobbits" CD.

Her stories have also been published in Reloaded: Both Barrels, Shifters, and A Bubba in Time Saves None and Abandoned Towers.

Her poetry appeared in print magazines Mythic Circle, Dreams of Decadence, and Abandoned Towers as well as Penumbra, The Voices Project, and the Metastasis, Boundless, and Di-Verse-City anthologies.

The Boy Who Usually Wasn't There

Allan Izen

The playground was scary at night. Wayne hurried down the gravel path not daring to look right or left. He wasn't the bravest kid in the world and he wanted to get out of there as fast as he could. All the shapes looming over him in the dark were creeping him out. It was such a familiar, happy place in the daytime, during recess, but now the slide, chinning bars and ladders, along with the push-go-round were like giant insects, silent, menacing silhouettes.

A whispery river of wind gushed through the trees making them twist and dance as if in pain. The flagpole chain knocked against the pole with a far-off hollow *ping . . . ping-ping . . . ping . . .*

Something caught his eye.

He peeked fearfully into the gloom and saw a kid sitting on a swing.

Who was that? Wayne wondered. *And what was he doing on the swings at this hour? Was he by himself*?

He was a small boy in a grimy rubber raincoat and oversized gumboots. He looked feeble and kind of sick, with long tangled hair and a pale, almost paper-white face glowing in the shadows, as if lit from within. And his mouth - Wayne was repelled and fascinated by his freakishly big mouth.

The little boy looked at Wayne with tiny red eyes that glowed like diodes. He smiled, a long, slow wet smile that stretched his mouth ear-to-ear like a jack-o-lantern.

As grotesque as he was, Wayne had a feeling he'd seen the kid somewhere before. But where? It bothered him that he couldn't remember. You'd think he'd remember a strange kid like that.

The boy climbed off the swing and came toward Wayne in a slow, shambling gait.

Fear gripped Wayne's heart. He took off running.

***

Would this horrible day never end?

School had been dreadful, worse than ever. He never wanted to go back, not ever.

He got picked on all the time. He was Japanese, for one thing; he looked different. Plus he was small and skinny with thick glasses. He had a shy smile for everyone, he was polite and walked around looking submissive and humble, trying to be unobtrusive in hopes that the bullies wouldn't notice him. Most of the time it worked, his self-effacing manner usually keeping him out of harm's way.

But not today.

Everything had been okay until Mrs. Kelso sprang a pop quiz on them in English class. Pop quizzes didn't worry Wayne too much, he studied hard and always did his homework.

Mrs. Kelso passed out the tests, Wayne taking his with a little smile of acknowledgement. He began to write his name at the top when his arm was yanked from behind by Babcock, who had reached around and grabbed his elbow.

He didn't have a pencil of his own.

"Gimme the pencil, you needle-prick little nip," he hissed.

Sitting in front of Babcock was the worst thing that ever happened to Wayne. He could hardly concentrate on anything in class, always aware of Babcock behind him like heat from an open oven. Wayne never knew what he was going to do next. When he wasn't pinching him or jerking up his underpants, Babcock whispered threats and swear words and taunted him about being Japanese. Sometimes, he'd snatch Wayne's glasses or put things down the back of his shirt.

Wayne clutched his pencil for dear life. He turned to his tormentor with a pleading look and bleated, "Quit it, willya?"

The sight of Babcock's thuggish face made him weak all over. Wayne was helpless under his baleful stare. The expression on his face reminded him uncomfortably of his uncle Tosh: dull, hostile and totally unsympathetic.

While Wayne hated Babcock, he *despised* uncle Tosh. Sometimes he had gruesome nightmares. Uncle Tosh was always in them, teasing, tickling relentlessly, twisting his arms, poking him, slapping him and trying to make him take off his clothes. But in some of the dreams, when Uncle Tosh started in, Wayne could make himself swell up and turn into a vampire: massive, muscular and invincible. He would snatch uncle Tosh and bite him

in the neck again and again until Wayne finally snapped awake gasping and soaked in sweat.

The thing that really terrified Wayne about Uncle Tosh was the fact that everyone else thought he was wonderful; a kindly, generous old man who loved children. Whenever his mom needed someone to stay with him, Uncle Tosh was the one she always called. He'd come breezing into their apartment, joking around, giving hugs to everyone and pretending to be great pals with Wayne.

Whenever Uncle Tosh showed up, Wayne would retreat to his bedroom and close the door.

But as soon as his mom was gone, Uncle Tosh would come in and start roughhousing; throwing Wayne on the bed before rolling him around and laughing in that dirty way of his. Then he would tickle, pinch, and hurt him. He thought it was the funniest thing in the world to pinch Wayne and make him cry. Uncle Tosh would shake his head as if he couldn't believe what a baby Wayne was. He acted like it had all been harmless horseplay, a joke.

"Hey, come on kiddo," he'd say, "what's with the water works? You got to learn to take it, Wayne. It's a rough tough world out there, and if you're gonna get by, you got to learn to *take it*." Then the pinching and slapping would start again.

The worst was when he forced Wayne to play *Naked House*. It utterly destroyed Wayne, the pain and humiliation as well as the shame lingered long after uncle Tosh had left. Wayne knew if he ever told his mom about *Naked House* she would never believe him. She'd punish him for lying.

Wayne turned away, unable to bear Babcock's menacing stare.

"It's the only pencil I've *got*," he warbled.

"*Give it here*," Babcock growled, "*now*, or I'm gonna see you after school."

The class fell silent. Mrs. Kelso stood at Babcock's desk with a stony look on her hatchet face, drumming her fingers impatiently on her hips. "Babcock." She spoke in her flat, no-nonsense twang.

Babcock tossed his head disdainfully at Wayne. "He took my pencil."

"I *didn't*." Wayne felt tears brimming. "It's *mine*."

Mrs. Kelso cocked a thumb over her shoulder and said, "Babcock - out."

"*Me*?" He bridled, trying to look aggrieved.

"Out," Miss Kelso said. "I saw it all. No games, just go. End of story."

Babcock glowered at her for what seemed like a long time. Finally he eased himself out from under his desk paddle and drew himself up to his full height. Eyes half-closed, he tucked his shirt into his chinos, flattened his hair and gathered up his books. He did it in slow-motion, letting the class know that he was master of the situation; Babcock was just going along with the old hag because he couldn't be bothered to defy a loser like her. He swaggered to the classroom door, turned back and looked squarely at Wayne with a raised a fist.

Fear erupted like sewer gas in Wayne's belly. It was so *unfair*! He tried to be nice to everyone, he worked hard, stayed away from the rough kids, minded his own business . . . and now *this* had to happen.

***

Sure enough, Babcock and his sidekick Macklin were waiting for Wayne after school. He spotted them idling on the lawn in front of the building along with a crowd of hangers-on who were hoping to see some action.

Wayne plodded through the corridors, killing time. He thought briefly of ducking out through a side door, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Babcock and Macklin had surely stationed lookouts by all the doors. If he dared to set foot outside the building, the crowds would gather 'round to watch him get pounded. Once Babcock had him on the ground, bawling like a baby, he would serenely hold out his boot and make Wayne lick it. It was the tribute he demanded of all his victims. Life would never be the same for Wayne after that. He would suffer the plunge in status that befell all of Babcock's victims; he would become an untouchable.

Such were his thoughts as he eased down the steep iron stairs to the basement. He sat on the bottom step and put his face in his hands.

Why didn't I just give *him the pencil? Mrs. Kelso would have given me another one.*

The door at the top of the steps opened and Mr. Gomez, the science teacher, came skipping down. "Wayne, m'man," he boomed. "Come on and make yourself useful."

He took Wayne into the biology store room and put him to work at a big table assembling dissection kits for the biology class; packing rulers, tweezers, probes and magnifiers into felt-lined wooden boxes. When he'd put forty kits together, Mr. Gomez gave him a hearty thank-you, slapped him on the back and said he owed him big-time. He tousled Wayne's hair and told him to get on home.

But Wayne was still afraid to leave the building.

He went back to walking the halls, trying to look like he was going somewhere with a purpose. At five-thirty Miss Holman found him on a stairwell hugging his knees. Wayne told her he was waiting for his mother to pick him up. At six, Mr. Norbert, the janitor, told him he'd have to wait outside for his mother because he was locking up the building.

Tentatively he approached the glass doors and scanned the front lawn. It was nearly dark. Babcock and Macklin were nowhere in sight but, that didn't mean they weren't out there somewhere, waiting…

He trotted down to the end of the corridor where there was a small side-door. Wayne pushed it open as quietly as he could and scuttled over to a clump of bushes where he crawled in and hid. Peeking between the stems and leaves he scanned the area. Everything looked quiet, but just to be on the safe side, he stayed there until dark.

Finally, he crawled out of the bushes, got to his feet and looked around. All clear.

He started home.

***

Wayne pelted furiously across the playground, slipping, skidding, and sliding on the gravel, pinwheeling his arms. He glanced back to see the kid stumping determinedly after him with his floppy boots and that terrible gaping grin.

When he spotted the Barwick Street exit, Wayne burst out of the playground running faster than he'd ever run in his life. He fled down the deserted sidewalk until he could run no more. He jogged to an exhausted halt, clapped his hands on his knees and bent down, breathing like a rip-saw.

When he had caught his breath and managed to calm down a little, he looked behind him. The sidewalk was empty.

Once again he started home.

Wayne was grabbed from behind by Macklin, who crashed out of the bushes and wrapped his arms tight around him.

His heart pounded madly as Babcock stepped in front of him.

They had been waiting, after all.

Macklin's arms were like hoops of iron. No way could he escape now, and even if he could, he couldn't outrun them.

Macklin shoved him into Babcock, who snatched his ear and yanked his head back and forth, showing him off like a circus barker showing off a freak. "It's Wayne-o the ano, Macky."

Wayne squealed like a piglet.

Babcock laughed. "Ahh-sooo. Am I hurting your wittle ear? You got to speak up, Wayne-o," he cooed. "I just *got* to know. Am I hurtin' ya?"

"*Yes*."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" said Babcock, letting him go.

Wayne clapped a hand over his throbbing ear.

Macklin guffawed. "Eh, look at the little Nip, he's shakin'."

"Hey, little Nipper, you shake pretty good for a little Nip."

"Now you just hold it right there, little dude," Babcock's voice went soft. "'Cause Uncle 'Cock is gonna fix you up." He drew his fist back and thumped him in the mouth.

Wayne's head exploded with pain, he crumpled to the pavement, mouth awash with blood. Babcock' kicked him in the ribs, knocking him onto his side, where he curled up and wrapped his arms around his head. Babcock started kicking him in the back.

"Please stop," Wayne cried, "please, please, please." He was crying and not caring.

Hitching and sobbing, he braced for the next kick.

He waited . . . and waited . . .

. . . but it didn't come.

Wayne peeked through his fingers.

Babcock and Macklin stood over him like demons in their black leather jackets and greasy pants. They were staring at something behind him, down the sidewalk. Wayne looked back and saw the kid from the playground staggering toward them, a bright, brainless grin on his pumpkin face.

"Jesus, man, what the hell is *that*?" Macklin muttered.

"Eh kid," Babcock called, "what's a matter with you?"

After a minute he laughed and said: "Hey, I know, you're ugly, that's what. Yer ugly, kid, right?" He winked at Macklin but his bravado seemed a little forced.

The kid came right up to Babcock showing no fear at all. He tipped his face up and smiled that wet, terrible smile.

Babcock threw his hands up in mock terror. "Hey tough guy, you aren't gonna hurt me, are you?"

The kid grinned eagerly.

And nodded.

Babcock was taken aback. There was something strange, even scary, about this freaky little kid. He took a tentative step back.

And immediately realized he'd made a mistake – backing away was a sign of timidity. He made a lame effort to save face by snapping into a fighting stance, balling his fists and snarling, "Eh, kid, who d'fuck ya' think you are?"

His menacing bravado was belied by the quaver in his voice.

***

This was exasperating. Babcock chewed his lips tensely and thought it over. Here he was, being humiliated in front of Macklin by this sucky-looking little weirdo and all he could do was make stupid wisecracks. He considered his dilemma; if he decked the little bastard, everyone would call him a bully for picking on a little kid. *But they'd better fucking not*. On the other hand, if he didn't do anything, they'd say a little kid had faced him down. It didn't take long to decide. *Better a bully than a coward*.

Babcock's arm shot out faster than the eye could follow; he seized the kid by the lapels of his raincoat and yanked him off the ground, bringing him close, hawked up a loogie and blew it on his face. "Now you listena' me, you ass-lickin' little shit."

The kid astonished them all by throwing his arms around Babcock's neck and giving him a hug.

"Whoa,"cried Macklin,"he's puttin' the moves on ya, 'Cock."

Macklin guffawed as the kid pressed his lips under Babcock's ear. "Hey, yer engaged now," Macklin cried. "He *wuvs* oo!"

Babcock paid no attention. He waltzed around woozily under the kid's weight for a while, then sighed and toppled backwards like a felled tree.

The kid went down with him, clinging like an ardent lover.

Babcock groaned.

"Eh, 'Cock, you okay, man? Talk to me."

A huge *oof* of pain escaped Babcock, he clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Come on, man, say somethin'."

The kid pushed his face deep into Babcock's neck and wagged his head from side-to-side making *mmm* noises.

Suddenly, blood burst out of Babcock and poured onto the sidewalk, pooling under his neck.

"Eh, this is *bullshit*." Macklin roared. He was Babcock's right-hand man, he had to do something no matter how scared he was. He bent down and gave the kid a vicious back-handed blow to the head.

The kid wasn't fazed at all. He kept working on Babcock's neck.

Macklin hit him again, harder. This time the kid's red eyes slid sideways and locked on him.

"Leggo a him, y' little bastit."

The kid pulled his head away and looked Macklin full in the face. His mouth was smeared with blood, gouts of it were sliding down his raincoat. The pond of blood under Babcock's neck was growing larger.

All at once the kid leaped straight up, catching Macklin around the head and clutching him hard.

Macklin tried to push him away. "Get – *ugh* – get off a me," he hissed.

The kid's head shot forward like a piston and he seized a generous pinch of Macklin's neck in his goblin jaws. Macklin screamed with his mouth closed, struggling furiously, thrashing and throwing himself around. He dropped to his knees, then eased himself on to his back as if he were getting into a bed. At the end he lay still, staring at nothing, his blood merging with Babcock's on the sidewalk.

***

Wayne started squirming backwards on his belly, praying the kid wouldn't notice.

But the kid paid no attention to him at all.

When he'd backed out from under the light of the street lamp into a darker place, he pushed up to his knees, never taking his eyes off the kid, who was still working on Macklin.

As he got to his feet, the kid looked up at him and winked.

That did it. Wayne bolted, flying down the dark sidewalk, trying his best to sprint, but only able to manage a painful, old-man's hobble. His head throbbed, his ribs and back burned with pain, but fear and panic drove him on. Limping and stumbling, he reached the Barwick gate and looked back.

The kid was coming.

Wayne sighed deeply as he watched him come. He waited helplessly, hands hanging at his sides. He was exhausted. He couldn't run any more.

But a strange feeling came over him as the kid drew near. The dread, the panic and terror began to fade. *Whatever had happened back there*, Wayne thought, *the kid had never threatened him. On the contrary, he had defended him, like a guardian.*

The kid came clumping up to Wayne in his floppy boots and raincoat and gave him a big bloody smile.

Wayne wasn't scared at all, not any more. He got down on his knees and gave him a grateful hug.

The kid hugged him back, looking very pleased.

And melted into him.

As Wayne trudged wearily home, a warm, happy feeling stole over him.

The kid had finally made himself known. Wayne was happy about that.

With Babcock and Macklin gone, his life was going to get much better.

Wayne was glad the kid had come into his life.

He made a little smile that was not so nice.

Just wait until Uncle Tosh starts up again

Allan Izen

Allan Izen's penchant for horror stems from the fact that he lives on a remote Pacific island surrounded by shark-infested waters. The island is shrouded in rain forests, alive with scorpions, poisonous insects and reptiles and centipedes that sometimes drop off the ceiling into bed in the middle of the night. Sometimes a strange hush falls over everything. He has lived in Hawaii for nearly forty years. His latest work has appeared in After Death, The Storyteller, Imaginarium and Strange Christmas 2012.

Dose

Jay Wilburn

Bradley had trouble sleeping at night because of his heart. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes in the darkness. He flipped over to his right side on the edge of the mattress, hoping that might help.

He had it under control with blood pressure medicine, eighty-one milligrams of aspirin daily, and nitro glycerin for emergencies. He hated the nitro, because with it came headaches that always made him throw-up… even if he hadn't eaten all day.

His five-year-old daughter, Holly, called it his yuck-yuck medicine. His wife told him that he had better be a big boy; she didn't care whether his head hurt, as long as his heart kept beating. She meant it as an expression of love, but *he* took it as a bit of a threat. She was *really* telling him to man-up, like his father told him when Bradley had been scared as a boy. His wife had the same knack his father had for implying that there might be punishment for Bradley not manning-up on his own.

When he had been on the heart monitor, back in the hospital, the nurses kept barging into the room every time he dozed off because his heart rate dropped to forty-one beats a minute. Bradley found it difficult to man-up when it was exactly forty-one every time. The extra one on the beat count disturbed him. They weren't estimating. His body had an exact mode for sleep, and it made what happened in his house, at night, more terrifying to him, for reasons he couldn't articulate.

"Like it was by design."

His sleep-starved brain had kicked his mouth into motion without his consent. His wife called it 'Bradley's broken filter'. She did not stir on the other side of the mattress, so he felt safe. No argument about nitro, not just yet.

He exhaled, and felt that familiar throb inside his chest.

Bradley knew the moment his heart dropped to forty-one. The crossover happened in that exact instance; that place where thoughts slipped into dreams. For normal people, this might be the moment someone felt like they were falling and jerked awake. Normal people laughed about it and drifted back to sleep.

For Bradley, his drowning sense of consciousness just registered that he wasn't quite breathing any longer. His heart felt sluggish and rolled

slowly through the subsequent beats, instead of drumming with determination. The sluggish feeling traveled up from his chest into his throat. He could feel the oxygen growing thin in his lungs and skull.

At home, he had no nurses to barge in.

Bradley startled awake, shaking the mattress hard enough to make the headboard squeak. He took several deep breaths until his heart paced back up and the fog cleared. Pain laced through his chest. Bradley grabbed the middle of his t-shirt and balled it up in his fist.

He shook his head against the pillow.

"Time to man-up and throw up."

Bradley pawed at the bedside table in the dark. He tried to turn the alarm clock in order to gain some light, but he couldn't find the face. He found the bottle of aspirin, based on the shape of its cap and the generic blood pressure meds by the feel of the label on the side accidentally knocking over books and pens in the process.

A glass spilled, shattering on the floor.

Bradley cursed.

He turned his head back to his shoulder, looking up at the dark ceiling. He felt his pulse throbbing in his neck and forehead. The move made his eyes feel like they might burst.

Both his ears rang.

"Sorry, Mary, I'm trying to find my nitro. I don't even remember leaving a glass out."

He turned back and took deep breaths to clear the pressure in his head. His chest stabbed once before returning to a dull ache.

He reached back on the small, wet tabletop. He couldn't find the other two bottles during his search.

Everything is on the wet, glassy floor now, he thought.

His hand scattered playing cards, plastic blocks, and he had to sweep a dozen marbles off of the surface. Bradley froze with his hand extended. He felt awake enough to realize all this stuff on his table did not belong.

He reached for the lamp. The shape under his fingers reminded him of spires, from the artwork in Holly's storybook, with the rhyming verses. Bradley could not find a knob or cord or any other switch to produce light from the strange spire. The edge sharpened before he noticed, and it sliced along the underside of four fingers.

His chest tightened and he drew his hand back, clenching his fist. He felt the wetness between his fingers and heard the drops landing on the sheet over his lap and sweatpants.

"Mary, see if you can turn on your lamp. We're having a bad night."

Bradley wrapped his hand in the sheet, gripping it.

He tried to convince himself he was dreaming. In dreams, he couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not. In real life, there was never any doubt. Even in the darkness and confusion, he had no doubt.

"Mary, wake up. I need your help. It's happening."

He reached along the fitted sheet with his unbloodied hand. Bradley thought about the distinct possibility of losing all his fingers. The wrinkled sheet slid under his palm with tacky sweat soaked into the material. The mattress depressed as he found his wife's territory of the bed.

They needed to flip the mattress. The thought of it made his chest hurt worse.

He found stiff hair and stopped. Bradley swallowed. He felt around the loose, rubbery skin attached to the hair. He gripped the sheet tighter with his other hand.

Bradley imagined his wife deflated like a balloon – a bag emptied of guts. Nothing like that had happened before, but they had been concerned about an escalation, since the first few times reality thinned.

He found two even holes leading inside the rubbery flesh. His throat felt slick as his stomach rolled once inside him. He found the bulb of a nose and it honked when he squeezed it.

Bradley felt cold and his hand shook on the nose.

Mask?

He lifted it. The mask twitched under his grasp and Bradley paused. The rubbery flesh yanked away, leaving his empty hand suspended over the bed in the darkness. He lowered his hand and felt the mask's hair again. It honked without him touching the nose before skittering up under the sheets, away from Bradley's hand.

He kicked the sheets away and pulled his legs out from under them. The sheet pulled away from his partially clotted fingers.

"Bradley?"

Bradley looked down at the mound of bedding, his teeth clamped down so hard his jaw ached. His wife's voice was low and strained. It came muffled from under the pile. Each beat of his heart punched at the inside of

his chest, shaking his entire body. He imagined the difficulty of speaking with a deflated, rubber throat.

"Bradley, it's happening. I don't know where I am."

He ignored the sheets and looked over the side of the mattress. "Mary?"

The surface of the carpet was uneven, with marbles, books, and toys scattered around. He knew broken glass and sharp blocks peppered around the debris where he couldn't see.

"You couldn't make that disappear, and leave my wife?" He said to the imposing darkness.

"Bradley?"

He looked up at the ceiling where the muffled voice projected. He felt a moment of relief that he would not be crawling under the bed to find her this time.

"Mary, tell me how to get to you before this gets any worse."

The bed shifted. Bradley held his breath. The mattress and box spring lifted and turned in the air. He waited for the entire thing to soar like a magic carpet, scrapping him off the spackled ceiling.

"Mary?"

"Go find Holly! Just go!"

Bradley heard her desperation through the ceiling. He thought he had her located above and just out from the dresser. He wondered if he could open a hole once the bed flew.

The bed rocked from side to side as it walked on its legs instead of flying. The mattress bowed upward, tipping Bradley back against the headboard. He pictured a beast arching its back.

He struggled to regain his balance as he listened to the hard feet crunching on glass. The sound indicated the bed had sprouted a few extra legs during its metamorphosis.

"Mary?"

Something bit down on his bare toes. Bradley kicked his foot in the air over the lumbering bed. The mouth didn't hurt, but he felt the rubbery skin and tufts of hair slapping against his ankle. The nose honked twice off his foot.

"Get the hell off me, clown."

Bradley yanked the mask loose with a snap and hurled it. He crawled up onto his knees as the bed picked up speed.

“The room is spreading out.” He said to Mary.

Bradley crawled to his wife’s side of the galloping mattress. In the dimness he noticed that grassland rolled off toward the bedroom door in the distance. Yellow eyes glowed between the blades waving in the breeze under pale stars.

“Not here again! Why, Holly?”

He looked up and saw the ceiling replaced by an alien sky. He supposed with the vanishing ceiling went his wife.

Bradley heard the rubbery scurry of the mask scaling his side of the bed. “No way you caught up with us, cheater.”

With the starlight, he looked back and saw multiple clown faces wriggling over the sheets with their dark, empty sockets, staring.

Bradley leapt and struck the ground off balance, feeling the full impact in his ribs.

His intent to roll his landing failed him as he heaved for air. The grassland was rougher than he remembered.

He turned to see the bed, but instead saw furrows snaking through the grass toward him. Bradley staggered to his feet and ran without counting his pursuers. His lungs protested, but he pumped his feet the way he remembered, in order to keep the grass from grabbing his ankle and dragging him down.

Shadows lifted from the land between him and the door. He saw the shapes that went with the yellow eyes for the first time.

“I’m not letting you watch TV anymore!”

The shadows lunged. Bradley dropped his shoulder and pressed through. Their hands passed right through him instead of locking onto him. He felt the cold and the sharpness of the claws pass through his heart. He tried to ignore the irregular rhythm of their clutches and hoped the damage wasn’t permanent.

He caught a glimpse of the land between the closing shadows. The door lay further away, as if he was swimming against a riptide.

“Holly, stop it, or you are in big trouble!”

One of the shadows chuckled. “*Man-up, daddy.”*

Another growled behind him. “*Time to do the dishes while you heart still beats*.”

Bradley swatted around his ears. “Get out of my head!”

He staggered through the darkness and saw the doorway racing toward him through the grass. As he stood, the shadows laughed behind him and the grass wrapped around his calves, cutting into his skin.

"Don't hit me, Holly. I won't survive this."

One of the yellow-eyed shadows spoke behind him, close enough for Bradley to feel the cold air against his neck. He wondered why she made their breath cold.

It said, "*The only time you ever saw your father doing the dishes was the day he fell over dead with a broken heart*."

Bradley turned to swing on the monster. It backed away as the doorway whipped past his shoulders hard enough for him to feel the wind. He fell to his back on the carpet as the floor rushed underneath him. The rug burned his elbows, tearing past his body.

The shadow gripped the door with its claw as its friends bobbed behind it. "*Get going, heart breaker. We'll keep an eye on your wife for you*."

Bradley sat up and the shadow slammed the door.

Bradley groaned. "I can't be everywhere."

He turned and looked through the maze of muted walls painted in thick, crayon lines. Decorative lamps lit the passages with pastel flames. He couldn't tell if he had reached the hallway of the real house or if Holly had him trapped in these walls.

Bradley remembered his father telling him that any maze could be solved by running his hand along one wall until he reached the end. Bradley had held onto plenty of walls over the years, but never to solve a problem more complicated than standing or catching his breath.

He suspected this maze didn't follow his father's rules.

The walls shifted and became curved, blocking his view of the maze. The glass shattered off the lamps, and sprinkled the floor around him. Flames licked up the walls and across the ceiling.

Bradley looked down at the shards.

"I can't walk across that, Holly."

Smoke swirled around his head and the ceiling opened to reveal dark rolling clouds. The glass hopped on the vibrating floor and multiplied.

Bradley shook his head.

"Are you testing how much I love you?"

The glass filled the carpet until he saw nothing but the flames, sparkling off the entire jagged floor.

Enough to walk across broken glass?

"Five-year-olds shouldn't be so into metaphors." Bradley said taking two deep breaths. "Man-up and cut up."

He stepped forward and the floor went out from under him. The glass poured into the void like sugar. Smoke billowed up into the sky. Bradley clawed at the canyon walls as he slid toward the endless darkness.

He felt the cuts reopen on his fingers and one of his toenails bent up from the rock. Bradley groaned.

"Baby, give me something to hold onto."

He caught a spit of rock with his bloody fingers and pulled himself back up the rocky walls slowly. His muscles shook as he tried to claw his way back into a part of the house he might recognize.

Bradley's heart hammered in his chest in a way he never felt before; his blood pressure was brought down to near normal.

He lifted himself onto a jagged section of floor. Bradley thought he might be in the guest room near Holly's door, but the curve of the walls confused him.

One of his doctors had explained to Bradley that normal blood pressure had a wider chasm between the systolic pressure and the resting diastolic pressure, then when his pressure was higher and more dangerous.

Bradley's eyes slid closed. "*There should be a bigger difference between pressure and rest*."

He heard the growl and opened his eyes. The teeth and tentacles exited the shadows around the curving walls. He pushed up and turned away from the red eyes. His daughter called them grinders.

"Not you again."

Bradley ran without watching the direction. He just needed to get away.

He crashed through the door into Holly's bedroom and stopped, surprised to even be there. Teeth snapped behind him and he slammed the door on the grinders. The door bucked in the frame and splintered.

Bradley fumbled with the lock.

"Holly, wake up. Wake up now!"

The room expanded. Bradley left the door and dove onto the bed before it raced away.

He shook her. “Holly, open your eyes right now!”

Her lids slid open and the room snapped back into place hard enough to hurt Bradley’s neck. The creatures clawed at the door from the hallway. Their power had faded, but they were not gone.

“Holly?”

“Daddy?”

He reached to her side table and felt around her clock. He found nothing and looked around the floor.

“Did mommy give you your medicine tonight?”

“I took it. I promise.”

“That’s a bad lie, Holly.”

She closed her eyes and the door exploded into the room. Pieces of thin wood from the hallow door rained down around them onto her princess sheets.

“I held it in my mouth and spit it out after the story.”

“Open your eyes.”

The teeth and tentacles crossed the floor, making Bradley wish he had left the room bigger for the grinders. Holly opened her eyes and they collapsed in the center of the carpet. The thick arms of the monsters snaked slowly up the sides of the twin bed.

His heart stabbed inside his chest and the pain traveled up into his jaw.

“Holly, where did you put the medicine?”

“I didn’t touch it, Daddy.”

“I didn’t say that. I said, where did you put it?”

The walls wavered and lost their shape. Something hot wrapped around one of Bradley’s ankles and he kicked it away.

“I put all the yuck-yuck medicine away where mommy can’t find it.”

“Bring it back.”

Crushing pain worse than a grinder or a shadow claw wrapped Bradley’s heart, and he couldn’t take in enough air. His vision blurred.

“It steals my imagination, and your yuck-yuck makes you spit up.”

Bradley groaned.

“You have to bring our medicine back. Put them both down here between us right now. Right now, Holly!”

She didn’t say anything. He couldn’t see well enough to tell if her eyes were open. He felt around the sheets and found nothing. Something

rubbery bit down on his toe and honked. Bradley forced himself not to cuss in front of his daughter.

"Holly, you have to be the big girl and I have to be the big man. We take medicine because others depend on us. You take yours for me and mommy. I take mine for my girls. Now put it back."

Numbness filled his arms and he closed his eyes. Bradley felt around and heard the bottles rattle. He twisted one open and popped a tablet of nitro, hoping Holly hadn't altered the chemical bonds with her powers.

"Don't throw up on me."

"I won't.'

He twisted the other cap three times before he opened hers. He shook out two and held them out.

"We don't have water. You just have to swallow them."

The tentacle wrapped around Bradley's waist and pulled weakly. He ignored it bracing against the pain in his chest.

"Mommy puts them in applesauce crushed up."

"You spit that out. Don't think of them as pills – just big bites."

The headache built before the relief in his chest. Bradley's eyes watered. Heat built under the tentacle and his skin itched.

"I can make applesauce and imagine them crushed."

"That's not good enough. You have to take them for real."

She lifted them out of his hand. He expected her to throw them instead he heard a crunch and Holly gagged.

"Just swallow them. Don't chew. Like big bites."

She made a noise in her throat and coughed.

The tentacle fell away and dropped off the bed. His skin still burned from the dying grinder's touch as his heartbeat steadied.

She laid her head on his chest in the silence of the house and cried. He held her and waited.

"Why, daddy?"

"Life is full of things we have to take ourselves, because we have other people that care about us and need us."

Something thumped out in the hallway.

"Open your eyes, Holly. You can't go back to sleep yet."

"My eyes *are* open."

He waited.

The voice came muffled. “Bradley, I can’t see. I don’t know where I am.”

He gritted his teeth. “Where did you put your mom, Holly?”

“I don’t know.”

“I need you to remember.”

“I don’t know. I’m not lying this time.”

Bradley let her go and stepped across the carpet. Splinters from the door bit into his bare feet.

He cursed.

Bradley stopped and looked back. Holly had her ears covered with both hands.

She said, “I can help you look.”

“No, stay here. Don’t go to sleep until I come back. Just in case.”

Holly dropped her hands into her lap. “I’ll try.”

He stared at her a long moment, holding his chest through his t-shirt.

“Bradley? Bradley?”

He whispered. “Try really hard. This is important.”

He turned and walked carefully out into the hall to search for his wife.

“Keep yelling, Mary. I’m coming.”

Holly shouted. “Daddy, what does *forty-one* mean? The shadowy things keep whispering it.”

Bradley shivered. “Never mind, Holly. Just stay awake like I told you.”

“Bradley? Bradley, I can’t breathe. I’m scared.”

She wasn’t in the ceiling anymore.

“Just keep calling. I almost have you.”

He felt the wall, and traveled up the hall another few feet, past the scorch marks. His toes tingled around the bent nail. A wave of nausea traveled up his body as he held the wall for balance in search of his wife’s voice.

Bradley whispered. “We are checking her damn mouth every night from now on.”

Jay Wilburn

lives with his wife and two sons in the swamps of coastal South Carolina. He left teaching after sixteen years to care for the health needs of his younger son and to pursue his dream of writing nightmares. He has published a number of horror and speculative fiction stories including a piece in Best Horror of the Year volume 5. His novels Loose Ends and Time Eaters are available now. Follow his dark thoughts at JayWilburn.com and @AmongTheZombies on Twitter.

Seven Snowy Deaths

K. Trap Jones

Everyone knows of my tale, but where the original story stopped, a new one had begun...

The evil queen, the magic mirror, and the poisoned apple; all prerequisites to what I am about to tell you. My name is Snow White and I must continue my tale to relieve the demons that have taken ahold of my mind, causing me to do such horrific things, things I cannot atone for. The poison in the apple had blinded my dreams to the point where I did not know if I was awake or not. The visions were so vivid within my imagination and believable in their idealism. To awaken in the mornings meant nothing to me, as I did not fully believe that my eyes were truly open. The infection within my mind made the dreams tangible and real life questionable.

When the evil queen met her demise and failed in her attempt to kill me with the poisoned apple, I was content with freedom for only a few days. You see, I believed that I had been infected by the apple. Although the poison did not end my life, it affected my mind and filled it with paranoia and resentment towards those who deemed themselves my friend. The seven dwarfs stood by my side in my time of need and watched over me while I slept, but the poison had begun infecting my mind and tormenting my dreams as I slumbered. The notion of trust was completely devoured by the poison that traveled freely through my veins, while the dwarfs waited patiently for my awakening.

I remember opening my eyes for the first time, trying to block the brightness of the sun with one frail hand. I heard the cheers and excitement from the dwarfs as that bright light pierced my skull, leaving me with a strong headache. Atrophy had corrupted my muscles, making me weak, but the ever loyal companions aided me in the quest for good health. They fed me during the day and protected me at night, but the poison would not leave my thoughts alone. It whispered sweet visions of death and corruption into my ears, entangling my mind like a vine to a tree. Thought suffocation was occurring and I allowed it to happen.

Trust was not an emotion I could spare anymore. How could I trust anyone after what I had been through? Everything was a lie. I just couldn’t

see it until I awoke. My compassion for others proved to be a weakness. It was a frail tree limb within a thunderous storm. I looked upon the dwarfs as an annoyance and that was the moment where I desired to be alone with the only person that I trusted…myself.

Not to mention that the constant whistling while they worked became so completely annoying that I could not stand it anymore. I remember debating whether I was even awake or not. If I remained in a dream, who would notice any slight change in my personality? I could do certain things within a dream, and the results would then vanish upon my awakening. No remorse, no regret.

I kept my enemies close in order to learn about their daily routines and weaknesses. I studied all seven of them, devising a detailed plan for each of them that I kept securely locked away within my mind. On the fourth moon of my awakening, I traveled upon a path that would lead me to my freedom. The road became a path of death and despair.

I chose to begin with Sleepy for obvious reasons. Known for his deep sleep patterns, Sleepy was often left behind within the mines by the others. I hid behind the trees at the entrance while I watched the other six heading along the path home, toting their pick axes. I could hear him snoring as the candlelight guided me through the darkness of the tunnels. With an axe of my own, I struggled to see within the dampness of the environment, but the snoring grew louder as I walked. I soon came upon him curled up upon the dirt floor. I lined up the sharpened end of my axe and raised it high above my head. Sleepy would never awake again.

Word of the accident spread amongst the others. We all gathered on the hilltop overlooking the cottage to bury Sleepy and pay our final respects. At least that's what the others did. My eyes were fixated on Sneezy, who was next on my list. The snot filled nose and congested lungs of my next victim would soon be silenced permanently. As the others headed back to work, I pulled Sneezy aside and told him of a mushroom that was known to cure even the strongest of allergies. Excitement filled his eyes as we ventured away from the cottage on a quest for a rare relic which did not exist. He was a disgusting dwarf; constantly wiping his nose on his sleeves and inside collar. His shirt was stained yellow and green even though originally it had been white. I brought along a shovel so that we could dig up the mushroom once we found some, but as we wound up the path, out of sight, I swung the weapon towards the dwarf. My footing

became off balance and the metal breezed past his head. I stumbled as his eyes widened. His short little legs took off in haste. I arose and lost him within the maze of trees. That is, until I heard him sneeze. His death was quick, and then I used the shovel to bury him in a shallow grave. I wasn't prepared for his body to involuntarily keep sneezing even after his demise.

Things were a bit quieter around the cottage with Sneezy gone. There was a sense of trepidation in the air due to two dwarfs meeting with a quick end, but my inner demons kept me focused on the right path. Grumpy became even more agitated in the coming days so I set my sights on him next. To relieve his anger, he would go off alone and chop fire wood. I joined him one night underneath the bluest of moons. He groaned about everything imaginable as he spliced the wood with ease. I asked him if I could try to chop and he obliged. The log would not stay up so he offered to hold it until I began my swing. I raised the handle high above my head as the moonlight danced across the sharpened metal. My arms came forward and buried the blade deep into Grumpy's skull. Funny how I was never really good at chopping wood; I could never properly aim the blade during a swing.

The dwarfs were so loyal to me, never suspecting a thing even though my yellow dress was bloodstained. I was not the least bit concerned about my actions; they would all be erased as soon as I opened my eyes. That thought kept my vengeance barreling forward. I would certainly not hurt the dwarfs for real, but the visions of killing them were certainly enjoyable and a way to relieve the built up animosity that I had towards them. They just kept working and whistling throughout all of the misery. Bashful proved to be a very difficult challenge. His shyness improved his skill of hiding and avoiding situations that made him uncomfortable. He was a master of the game Hide-n-Seek, so I invited him to play with me one day. I shielded my eyes against a tree and counted to ten. I could hear his feet scamper away. When I opened my eyes, he was nowhere to be found. To make matters worse, he was as quiet as a mouse.

The wind through the leaves was the only sound in the forest. I knew it would be a challenge, so I hid wild blackberries in his pocket and smeared excess rind and juice on his back without his knowledge. Throughout the land, it is well known that these delicate berries attract the ravenous wolves of the forest and are actually forbidden to be sold within the villages. As Bashful masterfully hid from me, I could hear the distant

howls of the great beasts. I played the game, pretending to search around every tree and within every hollowed log. I never intended to find Bashful; I doubt I ever could, but the pack of wolves devouring his flesh made his whereabouts very obvious.

The cottage seemed a whole lot bigger. There was an abundant amount of space. I was not bumping into people like I usually did. One of the more cheerful dwarfs, Happy became very depressed. I knew exactly what would cheer him up; a trip to *Look Out Canyon*. It was a pretty far hike from the cottage, but the scenery was well worth it. Along the way, we were escorted by three little bluebirds who harmonized with us as we walked. Their tweeting made Happy smile and tested my resolve with the plan. The demons joined in with the poison, bombarding my conscience. They felt my hesitation and heard my pleas of remorse. To counteract the betrayal, they blinded my eyes with a curtain of red, shuddering my thoughts with despair. I halted my hike, holding my head tightly. I wanted to squeeze the visions and extract them from my skull. With my fingers pressed firmly against my temple and hidden well beneath my black hair, I dropped to the ground from mental exhaustion. Happy quickly ran to me and put a hand on my shoulder to ease the pain, but the demons had complete control over me. With blood shot eyes, I yelled to Happy to run as fast as he could. The three bluebirds immediately took flight for higher ground.

My mind had shut down and I awoke from a blackened state. The pain in my head was intense. It felt like my skull would crack and spill my dreams upon the forest floor. After rising to my feet, I noticed vultures circling the sunset sky. Their black wings were easily noticeable against the reddish-orange clouds. Looking over the edge of the canyon, I saw Happy's body. Holding his little cloak, I must have pushed me over the edge during my blackened state.

Every time I woke up, I got more and more confused as to what was real and what was a dream. I had lost count as to where I was within the framework of the dream. I had lost reality and insanity was destroying any remnants of rationality remaining. I just couldn't tell where I was or where I strayed from my original sleeping state. Within the dream, I had awoken and fallen asleep several times.

Alone in the darkened forest, I walked. Alone with my own thoughts, I traveled, filled with both remorse and sorrow over what I had dreamt. The

dwarfs were my only friends and truly cared about my well-being. They were trustworthy and dependable; they not only admired me, but they believed in me as well. How could I have envisioned doing those horrible things to the ones I loved? Those thoughts; those desires, they are not who I was. With a poisoned mind, I wandered aimlessly through the woods. The trees altered and spoke to me, their evil faces barking orders at me and demanding that I stay true to the cause. Black crows landed upon my shoulders, whispering evil suggestions into my ears. Storm clouds swirled in the night sky and tormented me with thunderous voices. Heavy raindrops pelted me as if the demons were hand tossing them down on only me. I ran to seek shelter within the mines, but there was no hiding from my own mind.

The howling wind shifted the candles aligning the darkened tunnel and guided me deeper into the pit. I was being led to something; lured by someone. I could hear a muffled voice and crept quietly within the shadows until I came upon a mine cart that was overlooking a small cave. Dopey was sitting at a small table transcribing with a quill. In order to capture his thoughts, he was speaking aloud, fumbling his words. He was not the brightest spark in the fire. I could only hear a few of the words because of his stuttering, but it sounded like *Death* and *Dwarfs*. I jumped from the ledge as my yellow dress floated down. Resentment was only for the weak. Sorrow was only for those who felt pity. I held neither.

My arrival startled him as he quickly tried to hide his writings. My name stuttered through dried, cracked lips as I walked towards him. I ripped the pages from his clutches and read the phrase, *Snow killz killings dwerfs. Plez send healp*. On the fold of the paper was the King's seal. I gripped his neck tightly and looked him straight in the eyes as I asked him where Doc was. Saliva seeped from his mouth as he wheezed for air. I could feel his lungs straining for breath. His little fingers clawed at my wrist in hopes to relieve the pressure. When I felt he was willing to talk, I released him. He told me that Doc was at the cottage. As he spoke, I held his papers over the candle, watching the flame engulf the words. Tears formed in his eyes, but it was too late. The quill he used to deceive me was now lodged deeply within the side of neck. The white feathers became saturated with his blood. The path became disturbing once again. My mind worked against me and toiled with deception. Six dwarfs down, one to go.

I was no longer afraid of the forest. The trees offered me evil grins of respect. The vultures followed closely behind me as they knew I would guide them to more death. As I stood on the hilltop overlooking the cottage, snakes slithered around my ankles as if I was feeding them with my desires. The smoke rose from the chimney, and filtering against a clear, star filled sky. There was only one dwarf left, but he was the most cunning of them all. To underestimate Doc would only hurt the quest. I pondered my next actions while sitting amongst the graves of the others. A lone white dove flew from the window of the cottage. It hovered above me and dropped a bright, red apple into my hands. The words *From Doc* were carved into the rind. My nails punctured the fruit and squeezed the life from it. The temper in my veins ran rampart and free like an unsaddled horse. I straightened the red bow atop my head and grabbed a pick axe. If Doc wanted to enter my dream and play a game, then I'd make the first move.

I hoisted up my yellow dress and kicked my matching glistening slippers against the wooden door. After a few attempts, the hinges gave loose, allowing the door to swing open. Breathing heavily and toting a pick axe, I stood in the doorway and saw Doc sitting in front of the fire with his back turned to me. I crept slowly towards him with my fingers wrapped around the handle of the axe. I was prepared for anything that he might throw my way. The light from the fire illuminated his wrinkly face. His lack of concern baffled me as he puffed on a pipe. His eyes lingered on the smoke as its trail snaked upward. Was he prepared to die? Even without putting up a fight? He appeared to be no threat, so I surveyed the room just to be sure that there were no traps of any kind. When I turned back around, Doc was standing on the chair at eye level. He exhaled a puff of smoke that siphoned through my nose and mouth. My eyes blurred and my throat clenched. I dropped my axe and stabilized myself, grabbing the arms of the chair. Everything within the cottage appeared to move under its own will. It all would get closer to me only to be pushed further away, as though madness had completely taken over. I had no choice but to sit down in that chair, directly across from him, in order to ease my discomfort. On a small stool was a bowl of the most ripened red apples I had laid eyes on. Sadness consumed my eyes as I saw my reflection within their shiny red skins. Doc did not speak; he just sat there staring at me as if I was a long lost sister. When my senses came to and a small part of my rational mind became free, I decided to run. Everything was talking to me within the cottage; the pots,

the pans, the books. Their chattering followed me even as I ran into the sleeping quarters. Shutting the door behind me, I found some semblance of peace. I had to gather my thoughts and decide which path I wanted to choose. Within the room were the little beds of the seven dwarfs. Each one neatly made and tidied. However, there was one that was not. Within the shadows, it seemed as though someone was asleep under the covers. I crept towards the bed like a cautious squirrel seeking food. My extended hand grabbed the blanket and pulled. The pale, dead corpse of Doc awaited my vision, prompting me to stumble backwards. The room immediately became cold as my heavy breathing frosted in the air. My teeth clamored and my rosy red lips turned blue. I did not kill Doc, and I certainly would not have placed his corpse in the bed. To my knowledge, I had just recently left him by the fire.

I would not find the answers I was seeking within the sleeping quarters so I broke off a bed post and walked out the door. Again, I saw what appeared to be Doc sitting by the fire with his back towards me. The smoke from his pipe was spiraling above his white haired head.

"Doc?" I said with a nervous voice, but received no response.

I walked further, clutching the bed post.

"Doc?"

"Hello, my pretty," a cackling voice rattled out through Doc's lips, but it was not his own.

A cold sweat excreted from every one of my pores as the vision of Doc morphed into that of the evil queen's hag form. Her demented laugh filled every nook and cranny of the cottage. My stomach churned at the sight of her, still alive.

"I watched you die!"

"You only saw what your mind wanted you to see, my *precious*."

"I do not believe it."

"But you shall. The poison in the apple was never meant to kill you, my dear. It was meant to infect your mind, so that you would slowly go insane. That was your fate. To die would not be much fun."

"Then I will just kill myself," I announced, pointing the jagged edge of the bed post towards my heart.

"The curse will not allow you to harm yourself, dearie; only others. You will live alone for eternity and suffer how I have suffered. Your mind will be your only friend, but it will also be your worst enemy. Your curse

will destroy any relationship that you find yourself in; a plague for your heart. No one will know your beauty and no one will love your soul, for as long as I decide that you may live. For now, I bid you farewell Snow White, but I will always be watching over you, relishing in your mental demise. You must awaken now."

The queen vanished as I woke up within my bed. Everything felt so real; the sights and sounds of the cottage where wonderful to behold. The aroma of freshly baked bread filtered into my room. I was truly awake for the first time in a long time. I had no more ill will visions towards my friends plaguing my mind. It was as if the poison had vanished from my body. My soul felt intact and my thoughts became pure once again. Adjusting the bow atop my head, I began humming a song along with the chirping birds perched upon the window ledge. The sun was shining brightly within the clear blue sky. Everything was peaceful and tranquil within the forest. I searched the cottage for my friends and even strolled outside. I could not wait to tell them that I was healed from the poison.

I traveled to the mines, the canyon and throughout the forest, but not a single dwarf was found. Several squirrels followed me on the path while I walked home, and that's where I saw something that induced my curiosity. Upon the hill, overlooking the cottage, was seven tombstones. Within the stone, each of their names was carved without much care. They were all there within shallow graves. Seven reasons why I existed at all; seven distinct personalities that cared for me unconditionally. All rotting within the ground.

I thought I was in control of the situation, but I wasn't. I thought my mind was looking out for me, but it wasn't. I can no longer grasp what is real and what is a dream. The visions now blend effortlessly into one seamless encounter after another, where my actions either vanish or remain upon my awakening. I am truly alone with my thoughts and they seek to destroy me, one vision at a time. I thought my story had ended happily ever after, but this macabre tale has only just begun.

K. Trap Jones

is an author of horror novels and short stories. Trap is known for his raw emotional and often depressive narrative horror dealing with the complications and conflictions of the human mind. With a sadistic inspiration from Dante Alighieri and Edgar Allan Poe, he has a temptation towards narrative folklore, classic literary works and obscure segments within society.

His novel THE SINNER (Blood Bound Books, 2012) won the Royal Palm Literary Award.

He is also a member of the Horror Writer's Association and can be found lurking around Tampa, Florida.

Oh Baby!

Patrick O'Scheen

"Cripes, Paula has a kid…" Trevor crushed out his cigarette in a flower pot and frowned. It wasn't just that the hot girl from 4C had a rug rat, but also that he was stuck babysitting. *That's what I get for thinking she likes me*. He ground his heel into the sidewalk and stared out at the parking lot. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe he could wait up for her…

Babysitting on Halloween didn't fall under the category of what Trevor defined as 'fun.' Paula had invited him over, and nearly seduced him, before explaining that she had to work and asking him to fill in for her regular sitter. Under the circumstances, in a daze of sexually driven ego, it was impossible to refuse. He wanted Paula, needed her, and could almost taste the wild reward for a job well done.

Trevor ducked his head and pushed his way across the yard which separated the condominiums. When he knocked, the door to Paula's kitchen creaked open and he moved inside announcing himself loudly. "Paula? I'm here to sit with Chris!"

"Come on in, Trevor." The woman kept her voice low. "The baby is asleep… You *don't* want to wake him." Paula's beautiful face lit up the room. The woman was any man's dream come true. She was finishing her make-up routine applying a touch of dark lipstick. "I need to go." A click of heels and she was near the door. A finger raised to her lips indicated the need for silence, and kept Trevor from kissing her as she slipped out. Trevor just waved. He could wait.

He scanned the kitchen for any details that might help him care for a baby. Trevor grinned--a carving board and several knives looked promising. *Haha.* A diaper bag lay on the floor near the table and bottles dotted the countertops. A list of emergency numbers on the fridge, beer inside… Trevor laughed at the thought of a brown bottle with a plastic nipple as he helped himself to a slice of leftover pizza. Maybe not beer for an infant. Lighting another smoke, he drew a deep breath. Babysitting might not be so bad after all.

Grabbing a fist full of candy from a bowl that stood by the front entry, the young man plopped onto the sofa and picked up the remote. He flipped through one-hundred channels of junk, settling on a scary movie. A screaming skeleton gave Trevor pause to think…Maybe zombies were not

such a good idea on Halloween night. He flipped the channel. The light from the television blinked hypnotically beckoning him to stare directly into a scene of bloody violence. A teenage girl screamed as her tank-top was plucked off right before her body was stung by a giant insect. Trevor laughed nervously and changed the station again.

Cartoon woodpeckers paraded to an antiquated theme, while a poorly drawn hunter attempted to pick them off one-by-one. Trevor chewed the candy in sync to the rhythm of the theme music. He could watch animation without the willies creeping up on him. Laying on the sofa, he kicked off his shoes and drew in a deep breath. He stuffed a pillow under his head. He could relax for a while. Just as his eyes began to feel heavy, he heard crying from the other room.

Stupid kid. He clicked off the set and headed for the bedroom, but the sound of the doorbell made him turn.

"Trick or treat!" Seven little monsters and a small nurse screamed the usual Halloween demand for placation. He shoved a fistful of candy into their bags from the dish in the hallway and then helped himself to a few more pieces before he remembered Chris…

Trevor reached for the switch on the wall of the baby's room. Facing into the dark, he saw a large stuffed toy, illuminated by a burst of lightening while the bulb flickered on, only to immediately die with a pop and a sputter. "Crap…I'm coming, Chris. Keep your diaper on!" Great now he would need to find the kid, blind.

Trevor went to the side of the crib and searched for the infant.. He ran his hands over soft fuzzy coverlets to find the warmth of delicate skin. He could hear the child sniffle, the tears ceasing as he shouldered the tiny package wrapped in blankets.

"Your mommy went to work…," Trevor explained and then realized that Chris was too young to understand him. "Let's get you back to sleep." He held the child tightly against his chest in the darkness and patted its back gently. Trevor paced the room holding the baby close and safe in his arms. The full moon outside the window reflected brightly in a growing mist, shedding just enough light that Trevor could make out the shapes of the furniture.

"Look little guy, you need to close your eyes." He tried to pull the baby away from his neck, but it seemed to be held tightly in place by some

invisible force. Moving to the tiny bed, he attempted to pry the child's grasp from his shoulder.

"Get off me!" Trevor began to howl when the effort seemed futile and pain shot through his neck, toward his spine, running like fire down his legs. In the throes of near panic, he thrashed against the outlines of the dresser and bed, trying desperately to pry the creature from his throat…

Something touched his face in the blackness of the room. "Trevor… Trevor? Hey kid, you're dreaming." His babysitter reached down and gave a little slap to his cheek while she snapped a large piece of pink bubble gum between her teeth. He focused his eyes with difficulty as he recognized the curvaceous teen who had always been the object of his adolescent fantasies. "You need to get your costume on. It's getting dark… Time for trick-or-treating." The young boy sat up sluggishly as he remembered he had promised to gather candy with his friends from middle school. "The kids will be here in just a few minutes. Get up and get moving."

Trevor staggered blindly down the hallway, hesitating as he recalled his nightmare. He stopped just short of the bedroom doorway, afraid to look inside. *Somewhere in the darkness----Trevor heard a baby crying…*

Skittering as fast as he could back to the living room, the young boy faced his sitter, pale faced. "Paula?" He tried to keep his voice from shaking, without success. "Do you mind if I just stay here tonight? I think maybe I'm too old for trick-or-treating."

Patrick O'Scheen

Who is Patrick O'Scheen? I ask myself this often. A sailor, a chef, a writer…even I'm uncertain. I know that writing is more than an enterprise for me. I's a calling. Books and stories touch lives like nothing else. So who is Patrick O'Scheen…read and find out. His book ***Kris*** debuts November 8th.

Nightmare

Rick McQuiston

Neil hadn't slept in three days. His eyes bulged, swollen and sore from the lack of rest, and his joints ached as they never had before. His unkempt appearance was starting to frighten all whom he encountered.

His apartment reflected all the stereotypical signs of a downtrodden individual who was balancing on a tightrope above a chasm of despair. On the other end of the rope lay the future, full of promise and opportunity. Behind him lay the past, infested with episodes of loneliness and worry.

His dreams always held him back. They forced him to remain perched on the tightrope and occasionally shook the wire, as if trying to knock him off into the abyss below.

His rational reasoning was to stave off the dreams, to filter them through a mesh of common sense and logic reveal only reality and peace of mind. But the nature of the dreams would usually rule out any chance at normalcy in his life. They usually won the constant battle over his sanity.

He couldn't really recall exactly when the dreams started. Trying to pin a precise time or even take a reasonable guess was like trying to mark where a horizon began or ended. But he did realize, with startling clarity, one ominous fact about the dreams…they were all the same. Or, at least, they all began the same way.

The dream would start with him walking in some city, minding his own business. Which city it was he could never be sure but the sidewalk that he was on always ran closely parallel to rows of huge buildings.

Some were dozens of stories high, while others were no bigger than small retail shops. He never could read any of the signs, which appeared as faded and blurred caricatures of names and addresses.

His fear of heights seemed to be magnified by the structures, which glared down at him like an adolescent boy would stare at a tadpole in a pond. The scene as a whole had a bizarre feel to it, almost like he was in a Dali painting, twisted and deformed, but in a somewhat relaxed way.

And then he would hear it. The same sound every time since he was a kid… the sound of a woman being attacked.

Her normally attractive voice was reduced to howls of pain and pleas for mercy. She was being assaulted down a dark alleyway on his left. Her

cries were always accented by various noises of cans clanking and boxes being trampled.

He was sure there was only one man with the girl, and this no doubt gave him the courage to investigate.

Even though his recollection of previous dreams warned him not to venture into the alley, he nevertheless felt compelled to help the poor woman any way he could. His moral beliefs were too strong to ignore it. His mother had always imparted her strong religious faith into him, which included her generous nature and her willingness to assist others in need, no matter what the situation. He would always feel responsible, to some degree, to intervene where he could.

He would always call out to the girl in his deepest and most intimidating voice. It never worked but he tried it nonetheless. After a brief pause, followed by feet shuffling, the attack on the girl would continue and he would be forced to move.

The alley would be dark, wet and stinking of garbage. Various boxes, papers and discarded food containers would litter the ground, each a miniature breeding ground for filth. He would hesitate at the entrance, unsure of his ability to face the situation, but nevertheless ready to confront the cause of it.

And then he would halt dead in his tracks as the silhouettes of the girl and her attacker would stop at that point…together.

They would look in his direction…together.

They would melt into each other, forming one grotesque abomination that would smoothly and effortlessly begin to flow towards him. He would still be able to hear the girl's voice, although it would be distorted into a raspy drawl that seemed to be mocking him.

He would be frozen to the spot where he stood.

Why he was not able to move, especially with such horror approaching, he did not know. *Perhaps because one cannot always control one's actions in their dreams.*

Or maybe because his subconscious was forcing him to face his fears and overcome them. Or maybe he was just too scared to move. He usually conceded that it was a combination of all three, although the last reason was probably more responsible than the first two.

And then he would find himself in his bed, or on the couch, or at a friend's house -wherever he happened to have fallen asleep. The

recollections of the dreams would be sharp and vivid, spurring disorientation in him about the difference between fantasy and reality.

He hadn't slept in three days. The ever-present hand of exhaustion loomed over him like a cold winter day.

He knew that eventually, inevitably, fatigue would win and catapult him back into the realm of dreams whether he wanted it to or not.

But one thought gave him enough encouragement to continue to fight sleep…his memory of the last dream he'd had; it was three nights ago.

He shuddered when he thought of the disturbing fact that each subsequent dream he had, the thing in the alley had inched closer to him, before he would wake up. In the last dream he had, it was right in front of him. He knew the next time he dreamed, it would surely get him.

He poured himself his eleventh cup of coffee, turned up the volume on the television as loud as it would go…and waited.

Rick McQuiston

is a forty-five year old father of two who loves anything horror related. I've been in well over 300 publications so far, and am currently working on my fifth novel. I've written seven anthology books, one book of novellas, and edited a collection of Michigan authors. I do many book shows, and read at libraries and schools. Also, I'm working on a Cthulhu-based anthology.

Phantom Flirts

Justin Tate

On each street, in each town, there haunts a ghost,

Whose starry heart is but a silver fog,

Who died much too young, merely kissed, at most.

And now seeks love thru window, door or bog,

These lonely phantoms may fly to your room,

Hover by your pillow or float aloft,

Dressed, perhaps, as a soldier, bride or groom,

But do not fear, my dear, a wispy waft.

The dead can feel too, though their lips are cold,

And should be treated as if they were still whole.

Give your ghost time, for they never grow old;

Consider their voice as they woo your soul:

"Shed thy fair skin and forsake thy warm breath,

With me, thou shalt have true love after death."

If You Should Die Before I Wake

Josh Strnad

I have not slept in three years.

Or has it been longer?

My eyes burn as though they are being stabbed with hot needles, but I dare not close them for a moment. I dare not even blink. Who knows what could happen even in that short time?

They tell me I'm not well, that I need rest. They give me little white pills they say will make me better, but I know they're only sleeping pills. I spit them out as soon as nobody is looking. I know something terrible will happen if I swallow them. Something I cannot be responsible for.

None of them believe me. I can tell from your expression that *you* don't believe me either. But God believes me! Satan believes me! How can you disagree with me, with God, and with Satan? I tell you, I have not slept in three years! As a result, I am so tired I can hardly even lift my little finger. But, in my physical weakness, I have been granted a power that is beyond human comprehension. You might think of it as a gift, but it is a curse that has caused me nothing but pain. It is because of this power that I cannot sleep, and because I cannot sleep that my body is so bereft of strength. It is only with the greatest effort, now, that I tell my story to you...

***

I admit that from the start I never liked Darryl Brown. How a young punk like him rose in the management ranks is beyond me. I hated him--everything about the man. I hated the clean, bright polo shirts he wore, his condescending manner, the smacking sound he made as he chewed gum. I especially despised his smile. He had a certain way of grinning when he told me to do things that made me want to punch his teeth down his lazy, arrogant throat. By rights, I should have been the one telling *him* what to do.

Then one night, I had a dream. In the dream I was holding a baseball bat, a genuine wooden Louisville Slugger. I was at work, just about to leave the break room, when Darryl showed up. His hair was slicked back shiny with gel, and he wore his signature pastel pink shirt as if he'd just stepped in from the golf course. He started to say something to me, but I didn't give

him the chance. Instead, I swung my baseball bat with all my might and caught him square in the chest. He stumbled back a bit, but no pain registered on his face. He just kept looking at me, his lips still spread in that cheesy, used-car-salesman grin. That look, so familiar, filled me with an inexplicable dread. I swung again, the second time hitting him in the knees before he fell forward, landing on the floor. I screamed with rage and horror, and swung the bat one more time, aiming for his head. The second it connected, I woke up.

My bed was soaked with sweat, and my hands were shaking. It took me a moment to calm down, to look around my darkened bedroom and realize that everything was okay. There was Cindy, my wife, fast asleep beside me. There was the whirring sound and soothing breeze of the ceiling fan. There was my alarm clock, its bright red numbers telling me that it was 4:47 in the morning, almost time to get up. The nightmare was over.

I took my shower, got dressed, and ate a bowl of cereal for breakfast. By that time I'd almost forgotten I even dreamed at all the night before. I grabbed my sack lunch, kissed Cindy on the cheek (she was still in her pajamas), and headed out the door for work.

My morning at work went smoother than normal. Darryl wasn't there to slow me down with any extra projects, so I managed to get quite a lot done. I was relaxed, feeling pretty good about both myself and my job for the first time in a long while. I didn't hear the news until after lunch.

Gossip traveled fast at the store where I worked. Joe was the one who eventually asked me, in a low, serious voice, if I'd heard about Darryl yet. I told him no, wondering all the while what was going on. Joe's face was grim as he told me that he had been in a car accident on his way to work that morning. The other driver had been drunk and ran a red light, smashing into the driver's side of Darryl's convertible. He had survived with only a broken rib, but the impact killed Darryl instantly.

As soon as he relayed this information, the memory of my hideous dream the night before struck me like a bolt of lightning. What a horrible coincidence. I staggered back in shock, my head spinning. Ed looked at me, confused, and asked if I felt alright. I did my best to collect my nerve and told him I was only surprised, as anyone would be. Joe started to talk about getting together a collection of money for Darryl's family, but I didn't hear him. All I could think about was Darryl's pompous, condescending grin and that baseball bat in my hands.

A few weeks went by. With Darryl gone, his low-level management position opened up at work, and I was offered the job. I accepted, still feeling a bit guilty about the grudge I'd harbored against him, but knowing his death hadn't been my fault. Sure, we hadn't been friends or anything like that, but, one bizarre nightmare aside; I would have never done him any harm. It wasn't as if I'd been the guy driving that car.

Like a predictable schedule of daytime TV reruns, life soon returned to its normal routine. I used to stop every morning at the corner gas station to buy myself a cup of coffee on my way to work. There was a bum always standing by the door there, begging passerby's for spare change and cigarettes. I remember he wore a tattered green shirt and one of those bright orange camouflage caps that one always associates with hunters. His matted gray beard surrounded a mouth that sported about five rotting teeth, which jutted out of his gums like yellow gravestones on a red hillside. His bright blue eyes always held a strange, alien look; as though he were staring at something nobody else could see. He was harmless, I knew, but he gave me the creeps. I couldn't help feeling a bit uneasy every time I passed him.

To this day, I don't know what his name was.

About two months after Darryl's death, I had another dream. In it, I was leaving the gas station convenience store, carrying a steaming cup of coffee. The panhandler was there in his usual spot, his palm cupped for a handout. I passed him the coffee, and he took it with a grateful smile. He gulped down a couple mouthfuls from the Styrofoam cup and then began to cough. His usually docile eyes swelled to the size of ping pong balls, and he drew his gnarled hands up to his throat, dropping the cup and spilling the rest of the coffee. I stood to the side as I watched the brown liquid puddle at his feet, a small handful of half-dissolved gel-cap pills scattered in the sludgy brew. I watched as the bum collapsed to the pavement, gurgling, little white bubbles forming at the corners of his mouth and flowing into his beard.

I awoke to my alarm clock buzzing and sat up so fast it startled Cindy. My heart was beating like I'd just ran a marathon and my forehead was beaded with perspiration. Cindy asked me what was wrong. I lied and told her that everything was fine.

My nerves were tense as I hastily prepared for work that morning. I sped through my shower and threw on my clothes in record time. I forgot to shave and rushed out the door without breakfast, without even saying

goodbye to my wife. I kept telling myself not to be silly, that I had nothing to worry about, but I found my own reassurances difficult to believe and couldn't shake the urge to hurry.

My worst fears were confirmed when I got to the gas station. A police car and an ambulance were in the parking lot, lights flashing blue and red and white. I drove past without even slowing down.

I made it all the way to the front of my store before I vomited. I bent over beside my car, muscles weak, body racked with pain, choking on phlegm and bile. I found out, later, from the clerk at the gas station, that the homeless man had died of a heart-attack, right on the front curb.

Surely, you can understand how nervous, how terrified I was? One horrifying dream of that nature might have been a matter of mere chance, but two such dreams--coinciding with reality--began to form the basis of a pattern. I was distracted from my work, had no appetite for food, and spent long hours late at night, listlessly surfing through TV channels. I slept only when I collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Deep bags formed below my eyes. Guilt ate at my soul like an acid.

Cindy, of course, noticed the change and asked me what was wrong. But how could I tell her? There was no way she would have believed me, anyway. Who would? I said it was nothing, and that she shouldn't worry about it. A rift began to open between us. She cried and told me she didn't understand why I'd become so distant.

I told her I just needed some space.

After about a month continuing on like this, we had a *real* fight. She was frustrated to the point of tears. I felt like a fugitive in my own home, afraid to let my secret slip. Hateful words were thrown like daggers. It ended with her stomping off to bed alone. I watched TV until 3:00 in the morning before falling asleep in my chair.

As I dozed there, I dreamed.

Cindy was standing in front of me, hands on her hips. She was scolding me as a mother scolds an unruly child. Her lips were curled in a sneer, the expression I hated most, and I was galled by the very sight of her, by that grating tone of voice. *You're my wife, not my boss*, I thought as my hand gripped the cold metal handle of a pistol. I disengaged the safety button and pulled back the hammer. Still she kept taunting, yelling, crying. I raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

I woke up screaming, paralyzed with fear, gripping the arms of my chair with white knuckles. The TV was still on, and the manic laughter from a sitcom audience mocked my horror. My pulse throbbed in my ears. Still I kept screaming. My guts sank into my ankles, making my feet as heavy as lead. My vision blurred and my cheeks were soaked with tears. My lungs were burning and my lips dry as they formed the words. *Cindy! Cindy!*

***

Those lying fiends! They tell me that she's fine. That I have nothing to worry about. They even have a woman who looks like her who comes to visit me almost every day here. She tells me that she misses me and wishes I would get better. But I know the truth. God in Heaven, forgive me! Cindy is dead! I killed her! I've killed my own wife!

Josh Strnad

is a small-town guy from North Carolina, a high-school English teacher, a pie connoisseur, and a yellow belt in Judo (from one semester of childhood lessons). When not guzzling hot tea and typing stories on his battered desktop computer, he dabbles in film making, writing music for his make-believe rock band, and drawing cartoons. Be on the lookout for his first novel, Pantheon (Greek Mythology + Wild West action) coming soon from Urania Speculative fiction. In the meantime he fills his spare time by working to complete his second novel and illustrating his children's book. Check him out on Facebook, or at www.joshstrnad.com.

Silent Scream

Scarlet Norton-Duperre

A quiver ran up Mike's back. The sound was swift and ear splitting, endlessly repeating, over and over. He had heard them a million times in the last few days but never as bad as it was tonight. His heart raced and his hands were wet and clammy from sweat. He couldn't stop his mind from devising all sorts of sick appalling things, all stemming from where those screams were coming from.

He was becoming completely mentally unbalanced.

The screams, were unlike any he'd ever heard in his short young life. There was nothing human about them, nothing animal like either. It sounded as if they were close at hand and yet very far away at the same time. As if coming from a deep dark water well, and he was on the verge of plunging into it from somewhere high above. Mike knew it wasn't really possible; there were no water wells out here in the middle of the Wyoming desert, but it was the only thing he could equate it with.

He began to regret ever having agreed to this camping trip. No one else seemed to hear the screams; if they did, they weren't admitting it. Chuck thought he was crazy. Bill, as always, agreed with Chuck. The only difference being that Bill thought it was his overactive imagination playing tricks on him where as Chuck didn't care either way what it was; to him it was just proof of Mike's insanity.

At nineteen, Mike had to admit his imagination was ripe and willing to take over at any given time. In this case he knew it wasn't his imagination, mainly because there were no girls involved, which was usually where his imagination took him. No, the screams *were* real, and he had to find out where they were coming from. If for no other reason than to show the guys he wasn't making it up or trying to worry them for no reason.

***

They'd been camping out here for three days now and he was fed up with the heat, the bugs, not to mention the stink of sweat. When the sun finally came up the next morning he was exhausted and short tempered. He hadn't slept at all, felt achy and groggy, his head was swimming in cotton wool and his stomach was churning. He didn't want to get up, he didn't

want anyone to touch him or talk to him, he just wanted to sleep and forget everything, especially those dreadful screams. Chuck and Bill went in search of secret treasure they were certain was buried somewhere in all the sand and red rock surrounding them. He stayed in his sleeping bag and tried to go back to sleep.

Just as he began to relax and drift off the screams came again. The intensity of them was stronger than ever. He vaulted out of his sleeping bag, stubbing his foot on a sharp rock as he bounced up and down on one foot, spinning in circles. With a sharp piercing shriek he fell down and landed on that same rock. He rolled around on the ground massaging his foot and backside at the same time, trying to ease the throbbing in both.

He grunted in agony as he lay on his back and stared up at the scorching sun. Mike wondered why he had ever been so asinine as to have come out here in the first place. He hated camping and the outdoors in general; cursing loudly; he climbed to his feet and hobbled over to his boots. Sitting down gently on his sleeping bag, Mike pulled them on, seized his shirt and buttoned it up to his throat before striding out across the desert plain. Either he was going to find whatever was making that dreadful noise, or walk back into Sheridan, get on a bus and head for home.

Either that or die trying.

***

Mike walked for hours, every painful step making him wish he hadn't gone tramping off by himself. Every time he would think about turning around and going back, that infernal screaming would start up again. He felt irrational and immature but his pride wouldn't let him go back. Sweat poured off him and his throat felt like the floor of the desert looked, dry and raw; but still he kept going. It did occur to him that people die doing absurd things like this but it didn't matter; there was nothing he could do about it now. The screams wouldn't stop and he had nothing left to lose, his sanity was already gone, why shouldn't his body go with it?

At the moment he didn't give a damn if he died…it would be worth it just so he wouldn't have to hear the repulsive sounds anymore.

Around midday he stopped to rest. He sat down among some thorny bushes for shade and removed his boots. His foot was swelled to twice its normal size and turning black and blue; it had been bleeding from a cut he

hadn’t noticed earlier. His shirt was drenched in sweat, as were his jeans; he was hot, tired and angry. Mike wanted nothing more than to take off his wet sticky clothes and run around naked, but even *he* wasn’t that stupid. The last thing he needed right now was third degree sunburn and heat stroke.

How would he get home if that happened? He couldn’t be sure at this point he was going to get home, but he sure as hell was going to keep trying.

He glanced around and caught sight of a dark tree line a few hundred yards away. At first he thought he was hallucinating, but the longer Mike stared at it the more convinced he became that it was real. Painfully he pulled his boots back on and started walking towards it. *Maybe there would be some water there*. At the very least it would provide him with some much needed shade; the bushes he had sat down next to were exposed to the sun and didn’t really provide any relief.

Nearing the site, a large dark lake surrounded by needle sharp trees came into view. Mike wasn’t sure what kind of trees they were, never having seen anything like them before. It didn’t really matter; they would provide some much needed shade. The place looked cool and inviting, and who was he to turn down an invitation.

He entered the trees which opened up into what could only be called an oasis. He strode to the water's edge feeling the coolness of the shade and sighed in relief. Kneeling down beside the water he immersed his entire head, keeping it there for as long as he could before shaking his head like a dog before finally straightening back up. Sandy brown hair slapped him in the face sending beads of water in every direction.

He shivered as the ice cold water ran down his back and chest. It was hard to believe it could be so cold out here in the middle of the desert with the sun beating down on the hard dry earth all the time.

Mike sat back on his heels suddenly noticing how quiet it was here. It felt strange, as if he were all alone in an uninhabited world. Even the usual insect noises that so often could be heard around water were missing. There was no movement of the trees, and the screams that had plagued him for days had fallen silent.

Standing up slowly, he realized something very strange was going on. He had never heard such complete and utter silence in his entire life, had never felt so frightened by silence. It wasn’t natural, it wasn’t right.

In many ways, he wished the screams still rung in his ears; at least it would be a sign of life, even if they were absolutely horrifying.

As he stood there perplexed and a bit frightened the ground began to rumble and quake. Mike was knocked off his feet by the unexpected movement, which was accompanied by a loud gurgling sound. The ground continued to rumble and move, the gurgling became a grumble, like the sound of an empty stomach. He held on to the branch of a nearby tree trying to stand up and falling every time he let go. Mike had never experienced an earthquake, but surely this must be what was happening.

It went on and on, coming in waves and rolling across the land. He could actually see the ground move causing the lake to froth. The first chance he got he ran for the trees, probably not the safest place to be in an earthquake but it had to be safer than standing next to the water. He fell several times in his haste, climbed to his feet and kept on running. Nearing the trees he noticed that they seemed taller, bigger, and darker somehow; as if they had grown since he passed through them just moments ago.

He hurled himself towards the trees with the force of a freight train, and slammed into a wall head first sending him flying through the air backwards. He hit the ground with a hard thump and shook as blood ran into his eyes from a cut on his forehead

Staring wide-eyed at an invisible barrier that he knew couldn't be there, he shook his head in disbelief. There was nothing there except for the trees. What happened, what had hit him?

Using his shirt sleeve to wipe the blood out of his eyes he stood up and walked over to the trees putting his hands out in front of him feeling carefully for anything that could harm him. He could feel the needles, smell a faint pine scent; could see the greenish black all around him. There was nothing there that should have stopped him from walking right by the trees, so what had?

He shook his head in confusion and spoke to himself out loud, "Damn, Mike! You've really lost it dude."

Laughing at himself he strode forward. The earthquake seemed to have stopped so he headed back towards the desert. He walked for what seemed to be a very long time. It was almost dark and he still hadn't reached the starting point.. He didn't remember the wooded area being so vast, it just went on forever. He walked on and on, trees surrounding him and the desert just beyond, seemingly out of reach. Exhaustion was starting

to catch up with him and he stopped to take stock of the situation. He wore a baffled look on his face turning around to see that the lake was still directly behind him.

"What the hell?!"

He was completely dumbfounded. This wasn't possible; he had been walking for hours there was no way the lake could still be behind him. He must have walked miles by now; he shouldn't even be able to see the water anymore. Turning in a complete circle Mike gasped in dismay. He was still in the same spot he had been in before. He hadn't gone anywhere…

He set out once more, determined this time marking his trail with a piece of rock. Every so often he'd carve a X on a tree, certain this would solve the problem. Mike walked in a straight line towards the desert.

He wondered if Chuck and Bill were worried about him by now, he probably should have left them a note or something. Then again, he shouldn't have left at all. He had been acting childish and had caused himself more trouble than it was worth. Now he was lost, cold and hungry, and it didn't look as if he was going to get home any time soon, or back to the camp site for that matter.

Once more he came around in a full circle. He knew he hadn't passed any of the trees he marked and couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong. It seemed that no matter what he did, no matter what direction he walked in, he would end up back in the same place. Confused he walked back to the water's edge, sat down and gawked at his own reflection in the water. This bewildered him as did everything else about this place. It was dark, there was no moon and yet he could see himself in the water as clearly as if it were daytime. Things just kept getting stranger and stranger around here.

Out of sheer exhaustion he lay down and stared up at the stars, drifting off into sleep.

Once again he awoke to the sound of screaming. This time there was no doubt that it was close by and when he opened his eyes, he finally saw its source. His own scream lent depth and volume to the other screams and brought him up off the ground as he scrabbled backwards, tripping over his own two feet.

"Oh Christ! This can't be real!"

He closed his eyes hoping the apparition would disappear, dissolve like his mind had apparently done. The screams continued though, forcing

him to cover his ears with his hands. Unable to prevent himself he opened his eyes and looked at it again.

Still looming there in front of him, it stared with utter hatred dripping from its lips.

Were those lips?

It had a face, a body and a voice and it was standing there screaming at him. It was made up of what looked like several different types of trees covered in needle like thrones, and human limbs.

Shuddering he kept telling himself it was only a dream, just another nightmare. Any minute now he would wake up in his sleeping bag and everything would be all right, any minute now. All he had to do was wake up and everything would be back to normal. Thing was, try as hard as he might, he couldn't wake himself up. That was okay, Bill or Chuck would surely hear him screaming and they would do it for him, all he had to do was wait. Shutting his eyes tightly, he waited as the screaming went on and on. He kept his ears covered even though it did not really help, he could still hear it as if it had crawled up inside his head and was eating away at his sanity; wrenching away the last shreds of his conscious willpower. He couldn't take it anymore, so he started screaming again. Blindly he took off running as fast as he could towards the trees, colliding with the invisible barrier once more, and yet the thing was right there beside him screaming its madness at him.

Mike climbed up a tree, higher and higher as the screaming thing remained steadfast at his side. He kept climbing praying he would reach the top and be able to see the desert but the higher he climbed the louder the thing screamed. Up and up he went, positive he would reach the top with every foot, but the top never came. The tree was growing, closing in on him from all sides. He realized it would be futile to go any further but he was too afraid to go back down.

What if he never woke up?

What if he stayed this way for the rest of his life, here in this place with that dreadful screaming tormenting him for all eternity?

He looked around, looking anywhere but at that thing that looked like a tree and a human combined. What was it, where had it come from? There had to be something he could do, someplace he could go to get away from it, but all he could see was the lake and the never-ending trees, and of course that thing beside him still screaming.

He bellowed his fear crying in terror and dread at it, and it mimicked him. When he moved, it moved, when he relaxed, it relaxed; and when he screamed, it screamed louder.

He fell silent realizing that he was trapped.

Dream or no dream, he was in hell.

There would be no one to wake him; there was no saving him from this grotesque monstrosity. All those nights when he had heard the screams, it had been coming from this thing, from this place and now he might be trapped here with it forever.

Climbing down, he stood near the thing he feared the most and held out his hand. He tried to smile and talk softly to it, as if talking to a frightened child. It no longer screamed at him, just whimpered from time to time. They held hands tightly and began to walk to the water's edge. As Mike looked into its eyes, he thought he saw fear, as if *it* were afraid of him. This gave Mike an idea and maybe a way out. Slowly he led the tree human to the water's edge, taking a deep breath; slowly they submerged themselves in the pond.

It didn't take long for the air in his lungs to dissipate and Mike's lungs began to fill with the icy liquid as he stared into the thing's eyes, making sure it wasn't aware of what was about to happen. His chest tightened, his muscles constricted, his hands found the throat of the screaming thing, or at least he hoped it was its throat, and began to strangle it. It shook its head and tried to get away but Mike was past the point of no return. It had to die; it was his only way out, his grip tightened.

But the tree like thing was strong and crafty, in the middle of the struggle it began to laugh and raised its tree like human hands to his throat and began choking him in return.

Mike tried to get away from it but the hold it had on him was unbreakable.

As his life began to drain away and he was giving up all hope of getting free of the giant tree human hands, the thing suddenly let go of him and disappeared. He choked and sputtered as he fought to break the surface of the water, managing to get his head above the water as he gulped in as much air as he could. His lungs felt as if they were being ripped apart by thousands of tiny burning embers.

He dragged himself up onto the shore, rolled over onto his back, closed his eyes and lay there laughing at himself. "See, it was all in your

mind, nothing to worry about. You just need to rest and all will be well again, you're just a little insane, that's all." He chuckled at himself, *maybe he really was nuts, he obviously had heat stroke and was seeing and hearing things*.

After a few minutes he fell into another exhausted slumber.

***

Mike woke up and found himself staring into the face of a stranger. "Who are you, how did you find me?"

The stranger acted as if he didn't hear him so Mike repeated the questions again louder. Again the stranger did not pay any attention to him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He struggled to sit up but found that he couldn't move. No matter how hard he tried his body refused to respond. Panic began to set in and he started shouting at the stranger for help. The man moved from his vision but Mike could still hear him.

"Help me. Please help me I can't move!"

The stranger came back into his line of sight and he had another man with him, they turned his head slightly and he could now see that he was lying at the edge of the pond. The men knelt down beside him, one at his feet and one at his head and they began lifting him up. Mike felt relieved that at long last they must be taking him to the hospital; finally he would get some help.

The two men were talking to each other but he couldn't make out what they were saying. He watched in utter silence and horror as the two men began to slowly change from what he had thought were people helping him, into the tree human thing; their limbs became entwined and their branches blended into huge tree trunks, and minutes later, the two had become one, the one that had tried to drown him earlier. It looked down at him and screamed.

Mike began to scream over and over as the thing stepped towards him and the limbs and branches surrounded him. "I'm asleep, I have to be asleep! This can't be real. Wake up, *WAKE UP*!" he screamed at himself until his throat was raw but it made no difference, no one could hear him, no one would be coming to his rescue.

He felt sharp thorns begin to penetrate every piece of his flesh, crawling up inside of him and twisting themselves around his bones and

muscles, branching off into his very veins, stopping short of entering his brain. He could see the tree human thing enclosing him within its body; feeling every movement of its limbs and branches, and the thoughts of other people, just as terrified, just as dead as he was, knowing that he would always, from this moment on, feel and see everything this thing felt or saw without ever being able to escape. He was a part of this monster now and would remain so forever.

His screams rang out once again at the realization. His terror and pain joined the others and went on and on. No one could hear him, except for the monstrous thing that was consuming him, and the others it had already consumed.

The scream of the tree human joined his own as Mike's mind became one with the thing in a silent scream that would go on forever...

Scarlet Norton-Duperre

is a freelance writer who enjoys the challenges of her imagination. Influenced by writers such as Poe, Shelley, King, Barker and Lumley, her writing style reflects their attention to detail and creativity. She is the author of several books and has had over 30 short stories published in magazines and anthologies through the years such as: Our Shadows Speak, Diabolic Tales I and II and Dark of the Night. In her spare time she does photography and her work can be found on several book covers.

Currently she has several short stories in upcoming anthologies, Diabolic Tales III, Dying to Live, Bloody Kisses 2 and Nightmare Stalkers and Dream Walkers. She also has a set of poems to be released in the Unpredictable Change Magazine from Chupa Cabra House. Ms. Norton-Duperre is an active member of the Horror Writers Association, The National Writers Union and The Authors Guild.

Ms. Norton-Duperre can be found on several social media sites such a Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, Blogger and Tumblr. To find out about her upcoming work and events go to her web site: www.scarletnortonduperre.com.

Flesh

James S. Dorr

He woke with the feeling that he should become fat.

He didn't know why, yet.

Perhaps it had been something in a dream? He'd had those kind of dreams a lot lately. Wicked, ugly dreams. Dreams of shadows. Shadows that coalesced into…he did not know. Zombies. The thought came, causing him to laugh.

Zombies…?

He had been seeing too many movies; too much cable TV. Not that he couldn't afford it; the time to watch TV, to go out in the evenings, and to drink and dance till dawn. Beyond the dawn if he should wish to. Anything to drown out the zombies, the shadows, the . . .

And what if they would not drown? It came with a clarity which surpassed the nightmares on that cold, bright morning. The sun was streaming through his townhouse windows, his bedroom carpet dappled by the winter light. That he should *insulate*.

He could afford to.

Much like a house could be insulated from the weather, his body, his own house -- he could add layers and layers to it. Fat. Skin. Muscle. Tendons and blood, covering bone-frames, beams and rafters, and, overall, softened, warmed, smoothed, protected by layers of white flesh, spider-webbed in pink. Pink capillaries; the darker red of veins. Neurons and arteries. Fingernails. Body hairs. . . .

He could afford it, to eat and to build such a house. Was he not wealthy?

The company he owned, when he went to the office -- he did not have to unless he wished it, unless he was bored -- swarmed with drone-like people waiting to see him. Venture capitalists, as he was, always begging for money to use for some new project. Most of these, failures; but he knew how to bail out whenever needed, and always just in time. To take the profit. And so, he had grown rich.

Yet *still* they begged from him.

He shouldered his way through his outer office, filled with supplicants. He waved to Ms. Ransom, his receptionist. "Anything interesting?"

She looked up and smiled, as she was paid to do. "One kind of odd one." She handed a folder to him as he brushed by her.

Once inside his office, he opened it. ***PATENT PENDING***, the top sheet said. ***AN EATING MACHINE***.

And with that, the dreams came back to him.

***

He saw them, the shadows: thin, wraith-like, approaching. Long, bony fingers extended like claws. Reaching, prodding him. Trying to touch his heart.

Fingers six inches long. . .

***

He awoke, screaming. Ms. Ransom called in over the intercom, "Is everything all right?"

He answered, "Yes." Said that he would be going out for the rest of the afternoon. And thinking. Always thinking. *Six inches of fat, that would just about do it. Make it eight to be sure. Most fingers, he knew, were only three-and-a-half, maybe four inches long at most, from webbing to nail-tip, but even allowing two inches extra for the fingers he saw in his dreams, eight inches should do it.*

Outside, he shouldered his way past a Salvation Army bell ringer, past bums and trolls and tramps huddled together for warmth on heat grates, past better-dressed tramps importuning for money for this, and for that charity. A light snow was falling.

And it occurred to him. Christmas was almost here. He…they must have thought *he* was Santa Claus!

And he laughed, *ho-hoing* as they shrank from him. He was still thin, then, but already laying plans.

An eating machine, eh?

So he would become one -- an eating machine, himself -- rich desserts, candies, meringues and puddings, following thick steaks. Obscene, heaping mounds of soft mashed potatoes, cone-shaped like a woman's breasts. Sucking, devouring.

"Patent Pending." Indeed! He snorted.

***

And he dreamed of zombies still, but not so often. And always wistful zombies in some way, still reaching out.

But now, at a distance. . .

***

As the weeks went from December to January to February, he dreamed less. The distances, when he *did* dream, increased also. He calculated it once one morning, having still screamed when they had surrounded him in a sort of ragged circle, within *that* night's dream, but, seemingly, they could approach no nearer. So many inches for each new pound, or fraction of a pound. In kilograms and feet.

That afternoon, when he went to the office, Ms. Ransom no longer smiled.

Nor did he give her a raise when *that* time came, when winter turned into spring. Rather he luxuriated within his flesh -- three hundred pounds of it if he weighed an ounce! His bathroom scale could no longer measure him. Clothing he had to buy in specialty stores now, not minding spending money as long as it was spent for some *thing*. Not frittered or given.

His body was too wide to fit in his mirror.

And as he expanded, his eating machine stock expanded as well. He marketed it as a novelty item, despite its inventor's wish that it help invalids gain needed nourishment, and, as such, it soon became a fad. A sort of gag present that wealthy people gave to one another; a toy for the idle rich. One they paid top money for.

Which meant that he sold his interest, right when the fad peaked. His timing impeccable, just as it always was. He made a *fortune*, as spring became summer. Himself, he was his own kind of eating machine now. He could not stop, even if he wished to, which he didn’t, not *yet*. Rather, he gloried in what he had become, four hundred pounds of him as June melted into July. His body not a house now, but instead a temple, a grand cathedral! Walking, something he rarely did, rather keeping to air-conditioned cars.

Hobbling, really, when *forced* to walk outdoors.

***

Screaming, the dreams came back. But now, not just dreams.
Maybe he became more sensitive to them.

***

When he did have to walk, still there were homeless, no matter how insulated his body became to others. Still, bums who slept on grates, scrabbling for handouts, as if the rising heat, even in July, were somehow their homes. Just as the flesh which was rippled on his frame, heave-hoeing itself in waves as he waddled imposingly from car to office. Ms. Ransom was no longer there, on the rare times that he *went* to the office.

From office to restaurant, where he now dined alone.

Ms. Ransom had said that he disgusted *her. Which was another layer he added to his insulation.*

His distancing himself from . . .

Well, from what?

***

He took up farting. To relieve the pressure when such was needed, so more food would fit.

***

From outside, the zombies. The flesh-eaters, just as he ate flesh himself to pack on more calories.

Even in summer, as sweat rolled in rivers down his smooth, soft skin, even now, lolling in air conditioning. He had a driver now for his car, the beam of his hips taking up a whole back seat.

Until even his driver said that he disgusted him, and that he would drive him no more. Leaving him in darkness, outside a supper club where he had just eaten, just gorged, just filled himself almost past bursting. But it was not so far that he could not walk home himself, now with a cane to assist his waddling. Or, was this part of his dream?

***

He was not certain. He never was sure these days. At night he saw shadows, waking or sleeping. The sleep-shadows still somewhat kept their distance, but growing ever bolder. Surer. As they surrounded him.

And the day-shadows, the ones when he woke--these were the shadows behind his own eyelids.

His facial flesh had, by now, almost puffed into pigs' eyes, nearly squinting shut. So corpulent had he become in his eating, as July passed through August. He *loved* himself more for it.

But now, now the walk home. If he were *not* dreaming. He squinted, he felt his way.

One block. Two blocks.

His cane skidded underneath him. He looked up to see a sign, some indication to let him know which street it was that he should turn on.

The street light was broken.

And shadows surrounded him.

Wicked. Ugly. Ghouls and Zombies.

Screaming! The nights he lay sleepless having increased.

Finally, he reached home. Air conditioning. The door shut behind him. Sideways, he scrabbled down the entrance hall, barely squeezing through. Until he erupted into his kitchen.

Struggling to reach the stove.

Then the icebox.

"A small snack, perhaps," he said. Speaking to himself. "Something for the flesh. To help meat stick to bones. Insulation needs fueling; after all, that's what they say. Corpulence needs to grow."

And, as he reached out, his own fingers touched yielding flesh. Soft, just as his was, but slippery, rotting, his house and kitchen dissolving into a mist around him. Perhaps he never had arrived there *except* in a hopeful dream. The shadows became real. Kitchen knives clutched in hands that were long and bony. . .

***

And he knew the why of it -- at long last now, the why? Of dreams and nightmares. Why he should have awakened, so long ago, one winter's

morning, feeling he must be fat. Cut off from the world outside, safe in his flesh-fortress. Succulent. Juicy.

Who had been guiding whom?

***

Ignoring the screams of his flesh, the fingers extended to foot-length and more, to carve their paths through it.

James S. Dorr

James Dorr's newest collection is THE TEARS OF ISIS, released by Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing in May 2013. This joins his two prose collections from Dark Regions Press, STRANGE MISTRESSES: TALES OF WONDER AND ROMANCE and DARKER LOVES: TALES OF MYSTERY AND REGRET, and the all-poetry VAMPS (A RETROSPECTIVE) from Sam's Dot/White Cat. An active member of SFWA and HWA with nearly four hundred individual appearances from ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE to XENOPHILIA, Dorr invites readers to visit his site at http://jamesdorrwriter.wordpress.com.

Apep

Joseph Pinto

Had it been the sun that peeled skin from his neck or the sheer ferocity of his nightmare?Blistering splendor poured onto him from the unrelenting orb. Fire singed his eyes, shriveled his tongue—the blackened, useless slug lolled from his lips. His speech now eradicated, rendered to meaningless gestures from his festered hands. The sun seared his flesh, melted his legs down to dripping strands; mere bubbling pools of tissue in the ruined soles of his boots.

Every night, each dream, the heat only intensified.

He had been walking down a pebbled road, a silvery-sparkling stream beyond a thicket to his left. He could hear it—the stream, forming words that he could not, murmuring soft melodies into his steaming ears. Disgusted, he spat futilely; gory mucous dribbled down his chin. He wiped at it with a skinless forearm.

Every night, each dream, the anguish only escalated.

He had never seen a sky so blue. Cloudless and pure. He gritted his teeth. Upon the wind ancient legends croaked, low and throaty, while to his right bunnies romped through manicured fields. The sun cooked him, made his eyes bleed, and from his core ruptured an awful sort of churn. The sort he might have gotten eating roofing nails or coals from the bottom of his dead father's grill.

In tonight's nightmare, he stood in the midst of beauty. It utterly sickened him.

A terrible mewling. From the fields: bunnies eviscerated in pink geysers and in the middle of it all, the most splendid serpent he had ever seen.

The sun threw rage from its golden loft in the sky.

He screamed himself awake.

***

Did his flesh itch from want or the ghastliness of his nightmare?

A tap at the window. His body jerked; the steering wheel caught him in the ribs. Another tap, more forceful. A shimmering ray of light

penetrated his window and diffused across his lap. For one fear slickened moment, he believed the sun had returned.

"Drop the window."

Clumsily he swung his head, caught the glare of the flashlight. He swatted at ghost mosquitoes, then rolled the window down.

"What are you doing out here tonight?"

Instantly, he knew he had made a terrible mistake and slowly raised his hands to the steering wheel. "Resting, sir. Been on the road awhile. Needed a bit of a break."

The flashlight glare jumped to the side. "Out of the car. Keep your hands where I can see them."

He jiggled the door handle and stepped out, the chilled night air a balm to his flesh—yes, flesh remained; he could see that much now under the flashlight's glow. Relieved, he pushed his hands upward to the somber stain of the sky. The scent of bunny entrails tickled his nostrils.

He heard a serpent's hiss.

"Have you been drinking tonight, son?"

"No sir, not at all."

He whirled expertly and with a ruthless chop to the throat crumpled the patrolman. A spinning kick to the temple knocked the man cold—movements so heartless, so practiced, the officer never stood a chance. He seized the cop by his hair, dragged him from the shoulder of the road and down a slight ravine. Slipped the trench knife from his jeans and plunged it into the base of the cop's skull. He felt the body shudder, finally go limp. A serpent hissed again in his head, and its tail rattled somewhere off in dreamy meadows. He withdrew his knife from the skull and rejoiced.

In due time, he would become a deity.

***

He usually lived in his car; a nomad's life, one to which he had grown accustomed. However, tonight he chose a run-down inn with what cash he had; now he slept, tangled in stale motel sheets and food stained newspapers. The nightmares, they discovered him, slithered and stalked through his mind. Beneath the flames of his sins, he sweat.

Deep in the throes of subconsciousness, his mind again succumbed to dreamscape's dark veil. In this dream, he rose from his cheap bed,

abandoning his yellowed outline across the sheets. A pebbled road stretched below his feet; a silvery-scarred stream gurgled like the death rattle of the officer he had slain days before. A tranquil panorama of pastel greens and blues yawned above his head and higher still loomed the sun, ripping at his skin yet again.

Reject Ra.

He screamed and suddenly found himself back in bed. Across his foot lay a newspaper, the headline drenched in moonlight filtering through the window:

OFFICER MURDERED: AUTHORITIES LINK SLAYING TO SERPENT KILLER

He smiled proudly, but then something scraped against the wall.

Laughter. *You fear Ra.*

He scanned the room, but the voice slipped undiscovered into the gloom. "I don't fear anyone. Don't you know they call me Serpent Killer now?"

Rattling. From the tail of a snake. *You cower beneath Ra. Yet you dare emulate me.*

"I don't—"

Sacrifice under Ra's nose. Only then will you shed your flesh, become what you are meant to be. A threatening hiss, and then the moon retreated from the room, casting it into hellish darkness.

At last, he tore free from his latest nightmare. Flakes of skin dusted his pillow.

***

He dragged his newest kill deeper into the woods. Passed the makeshift grave he had dug for the cop. Thoughts churned through his head.

The nightmares had plagued him since childhood, severing the innocence from his heart and replacing it with a hollow angst. He knew not what to make of the visions that poisoned his reveries, only that they rendered him misplaced and abandoned. Soon, however, he came to relish the feeling.

He cut into its clothes with his knife, stripped them off.

Just a greasy, awkward freshman, he first murdered in the bathroom of his school. It had been November; the sun long expired by late

afternoon. He loitered in the library, thumbing through books about bygone legends, until his eyes finally met that of another solitary boy. Eventually, he followed the boy into the lavatory, snuck behind him while he pissed into the urinal and drove his head into the ceramic tile. There were no witnesses, and he certainly had never been suspected. The death tang still lingered upon his fingers later that evening. For a brief while, he had stemmed his anguish. But relief never lasted. So he killed again.

He flipped the headless body onto its back.

With each letting of blood, his nightmares had only worsened. With each letting of blood, the serpent had only spoken louder.

He plunged his knife into its breast and proceeded to engrave.

He worked his hand and wrist carefully; his art form more fluid now than in the past. Sweat dripped from his brow.

Do not fail me as others have before you. Ra's rein must end.

The serpent, it never left him alone. When he closed his eyes, it coiled behind his lids. Secretly, he despised its embodiment of something far more unnatural than even himself. But he never lost the faith that if he could gain knowledge of the nightmares the serpent delivered, perhaps then he could pillage its power.

Claim it as his own.

We must cast this world into my glorious shadow.

He stepped back, studied his toil. Desecrated, the headless corpse lay strewn—a serpent dug into its flesh, twisting sternum to groin.

Sacrifice under Ra's nose. Only then will you shed your flesh. The serpent's words rattled through his skull and quite unexpectedly, he frowned.

***

He had pondered years over his dilemma: would liberation be granted under the sun, or would the moon ultimately conceal his damnation?

Under golden rays, he had feared for his safety, his very life. Yet did he not hide under the hem of night, seeking a coward's comfort? Meticulously he had fashioned a secure existence, believing it would eventually lead to divinity. He ached to be worshipped, but how could he ever be glorified when the masses knew him only as Serpent Killer...and not *the* Serpent.

He had never slain in broad daylight. Only a god could be so brazen.

Tonight, he settled into the back seat of his car, behind an abandoned barn he knew to be undisturbed. By flashlight, he poured over the newspapers he had accumulated. The headlines swelled him with pride—the media's copy dressed him as a rock star. Yes, the slayings had been linked, some twenty to thirty all told. *Serpent Killer*, they chanted his name. *Serpent Killer*. It gnawed at the root of his soul.

Never *the* Serpent.

He gazed through the window at a sky black as the river Styx. After so many years, he had reached a decision. When he woke in the morning, he would shed his flesh.

***

The silvery-sparkled stream spoke; at least he thought it did. It gurgled over the rocks, over fallen limbs. Around the beaver's dam it gurgled, and he loathed its song. The sun blew an inferno across the land. The thicket smoldered. Bunnies frolicked unaware.

Naked, he lay on a pebbled road and stared at the sun. It laughed at him, hurled boisterous flames that melted his toenails off. Nub whites of bone broke through his flesh. He screamed, but no one heard.

Butterflies swirled round his head, a myriad of colors, shapes. One landed upon the tip of his nose. He swatted at it but was too slow; it flitted back into its flock of comrades, their kaleidoscope of hues acid to his eyes. He realized he despised beauty, *all* beauty, and the nourishment its sun provided. Now he heard the fish in the stream laugh as well as the butterflies and the birds as they nestled in their boughs. The bunnies too, something of a high-pitched chortle—and the sun, its haughty giggling more than he could bear.

The serpent's hiss hushed the land.

He tore free from the membranes of yet another nightmare, slick with fright. Golden fingers groped through the back window, scraping angry red welts across his legs. He recoiled from the sun and nearly scrambled into the front seat.

Then he saw them.

The little boy crossed the field, headed to the trees and the stream beyond. A fishing pole bounced along his shoulder. Close behind walked the boy's father.

Shirtless, shoeless, he slipped from his car. Trench knife in hand. He stalked across the field, the grass beneath his feet uncomfortably sharp and hot, stewing his toes. Harder he pushed, springing smoothly from the ground the moment he touched down. With each predatory step, his confidence brimmed.

The scent of the father's aftershave tickled his nose, and the boy...he could already taste the boy's blood.

Persistent in its melody, the stream disguised his footfall. A bunny bounded across the field, stopped and wiggled its nose. A butterfly fluttered about. The sun tattooed the top of his head; something flaked from his neck and between his shoulders. It spat its fury upon him, ignited a deep ache within the marrow of his bones. He ignored it all, fueled by the unknowing chatter between the father and his boy—and the dawning realization that soon he would be a deity.

Nothing would deny him.

Ten more yards. The father would then taste his blade. His eyes sparkled as he tightened his grip upon the knife.

Sacrifice under Ra's nose. Only then will you shed your flesh.

Five yards.

Two.

A massive shadow shifted from under the canopy of trees ahead. His mind reeled, desperate to make sense of what had emerged. His legs buckled, and he tumbled forward. He managed to snare his prey's foot and tripped the father to the ground.

He pounced upon the man and for a moment, he glimpsed his own bewildered reflection within his prey's frightened eyes. One slash and his blade kissed the man's throat.

He enjoyed the ghastly wheeze from the father's gaping wound. Then he noticed the pus-bloated sores along his own arm, and a long shriek escaped his mouth.

From under the shadow of the trees, the boy halted and spun around. Staggering from the prone body of the father, he half ran, half limped toward the boy as the flesh separated from muscle in thin sheets from his limbs. He hissed even as glints of bone popped through the exposed areas.

Nothing would deny him. Not even the sun as it stripped free tissue and tendon.

He raised the trench knife above his head but it dropped from his grasp, fingers nothing more than charred bone. A numbness spread through his mind like morphine, yet the inferno within raged molten. His arms, twisted into jagged charcoaled spindles, burst into plumes of ash that clotted the air. The ruins of his legs littered the field, and he fell once more. He came to rest at the boy's feet, a smoldering stump.

Behind the boy slithered a staggering mass. It rose and towered above them both—he thought it had existed only in the darkest cavities of his nightmares—but now realized how terribly wrong he had been. The serpent in all its glory: an enormous thing with unblinking elliptical eyes and a horrid, triangular head. It glowered, forked tongue flicking from its jaws.

His face slid off into the grass. His torso itched unbearably as scales erupted from beneath his exposed muscle.

He glanced upward, stared into the serpent's morphing head. For a moment, he glimpsed his own features grotesquely bubbling under the serpent's. Then the boy's. The ancient abomination opened its mouth.

Sacrifice under Ra's nose. Only then will you shed your flesh, become what you are meant to be.

The boy walked away and then returned with the trench knife in his young hand.

Only then did he realize that the god of his nightmares commanded not him but the boy. Only then did he realize he had been mislead. Abandoned once more. "Nooooo..."

Another child would be prepared as heir to Apep's earthly throne and in turn suffer its depraved nightmares. Perhaps it would be this boy...this boy who possessed no fear of Ra.

Only then did he realize the only sure way to slay a serpent was to sever its head.

Joseph Pinto

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The New Gaoler

Konstantine Paradias

"Ask around in all of Hell," said the demon Andrealphus as he gracefully danced among the tar-pits, the great ring of iron keys in his hand jangling with each step, "and you will not find a single sinner."

"Don't believe me? Then allow me a demonstration!" the demon told his companion, who clumsily followed him along the edges of the pit, more perplexed than afraid. He'd come to know the tar-pits well these past years.

"You! My good man!" Andrealphus said, as he reached over a pit, stuck his hand inside the boiling tar and pulled out a screaming, burning thing, that suffering had rendered genderless. "What crime did you commit, that earned you this place of torment?"

"No crime! No crime!" the tar-creature exclaimed, its skin bubbling and sloughing off its muscle. "I only defended myself, when justice was denied me!"

Andrealphus let the thing fall back into the tar-pit with a *plop,* watching it descend into the depths. To his companion, a man with the smoking hole blasted through the back of his head, he relayed

"He killed his wife and her lover when they laughed in his face upon confronting them. It was an act of selfishness, committed by a bruised ego, facilitated by a set of boning knives."

"How about this one?" asked the demon's companion, pointing at another head that bobbed out of the tar-pits. "What did they do?"

"Who? Her? Oh, you'll like this one! Out you come, lass!" He laughed and pulled the next creature out by the hair. There was the impression of breasts beneath the tar, the nipples afire; there were also eyes that would make a saint doubt his allegiance to the very Church that had anointed him. There was a smile that was all blisters and lust, red and pink.

"I was a woman that loved everyone just the same. I'm only here because I didn't give in to the stifling insecurity of others, who wanted me all to themselves." Her tongue ran across her lips, flames along with it. Perhaps back among the living, this gesture would have made even a stone sigh with desire but here, it seemed downright obscene. "But I could love the proper man, if only I could leave this place of suffering. It will only take a moment…"

Andrealphus let her go, to descend back in the tar-pit. He turned to his companion and said:

"It was not her lust that damned her. Lust is, after all, a vice that isn't alien even to the Heavens. It was her disease that damned her and the way she spread it among fornicators and adulterers alike. But you did not come here to sight-see."

"I am not sure why I am being shown all this in the first place. I did not choose this fire-and-brimstone show." said the companion, smiling a crooked smile. The demon grinned and his face became a multitude of teeth.

"Had Hell been devoid of souls, then all this fanfare would not have been necessary. We only follow his orders." said Andrealphus, knowingly pointing downward, to the unspeakable depths below. "He's the one who set the foundations for this place of horrors. We've all simply followed, pulled toward him by the gravity of his self-loathing."

"I thought he was expelled from Heaven, in the beginning." the companion said, his hand pawing at the hole in his head, gently scratching at his exit wound. "Or so I've been taught."

"Expelled? No, your teachings are far too kind, naïve even. He wasn't cast down; he was flicked off the Almighty's shoulder, like a fairy tale cricket that had been plaguing Him with morality." Andrealphus took a turn toward a direction that the companion couldn't quite comprehend, only follow. The tar-pits became a blur, their vary of red and black running together and coalescing in the distance.

The companion blinked, turned and suddenly found himself standing before a cast-iron door, twelve cubits high, in the middle of a wasteland. He heard the harsh clinking and jangling of keys, as Andrealphus looked for the one that would fit the impossibly large lock in the center.

"He crashed through Creation on his way down, smashed through the firmament and ended up here, when there was nothing more for him to fall through. Do you know what he found? When he was done falling?"

The companion shook his head *no,* as he absent-mindedly picked at the scabs ringing the wound. He winced more out of habit than actual pain; sensation had become, to him, a distant memory. Andrealphus placed his tiny key into the lock and the hole compacted, fitting it perfectly.

He turned toward the companion as he opened the lock and said:

"He found nothing but humanity in freefall."

With a dramatic grunt, Andrealphus pushed the iron doors open, letting out a wave of heat and screaming that nearly deafened his companion. Spinning his key-ring around his index finger, he walked through and the dead man followed.

They stood above a maze, a nexus of corridors built out of flesh, titanic in their complexity, each path and alley festooned with jagged glass. An iron sun slowly turned in the heavens, shedding scab-red light upon all. The companion looked down and saw chambers of terrors extending in every direction, of such complexity, ingenuity and variety that they made even his jaded mind reel.

Here, he saw a chamber arranged like an 18th century Chinese room, where women with mouths for faces painstakingly drove slivers of bamboo beneath a man's skin, an inch at a time. There was a chamber that was composed entirely of insects; scorpions and roaches and locusts, that nibbled, bit, stung and clawed at a thing that thrashed and wailed in the mass. In the very next chamber, he saw a great cauldron wherein women were melting like wax, flowing together, fighting against the inhuman hand that stirred them.

There were miniature wastelands of ice and furnaces where sinners were broiled. There were empty chambers without light or motion, where a man stood in complete and utter silence, his eyes fixated on a single point of darkness that would flicker and change at irregular intervals, driving him all the madder every time. There was one that looked like a newly-wed's suite, where an old crone with snake-tails for legs was wrapped around a man's waist, whispering things in his ear that kept him from sleep.

"He found human souls, bereft of their bodies, weighed down by their own guilt until they'd sunk down the firmament like he had; only they had achieved it of their own volition, not the Almighty's hand. And he saw them hard at work, torturing and tormenting each other or themselves. He tried to make them better, of course. He tried to talk them out of it. Watch your step."

There was a sensation of not so much falling, as standing still while the ground rose up to meet them. The companion stumbled, trying to find his footing. They stood in the center of the nexus of torment, a cacophony of suffering piercing their ears.

"But they wanted to suffer. They needed to be punished. Not so much due to divine mandate, but because they believed they deserved it. It started

small, of course. A chamber of terror here, a tar-pit there. But it grew; oh, how it grew. And soon, he found that he alone did not suffice, so he enlisted the aid of those that had grown weary of pain and had now wished to inflict it. It seemed as if it was going to be temporary, of course. How much pain *could* a man inflict? How long *could* he stand playing the gaoler?"

The companion looked through a glass window within a chamber, which was shaped like a cliff top, a jagged rock high above the clouds where a man was chained upon. He was spread-eagled and naked, whipped by the freezing winds. Above him, a murderous group of crows flew in circles, swooping down to peck at his chin or claw at his forehead, drawing blood.

The companion leaned closer, as the bound sinner's face seemed familiar to him. The man turned his head and his pained expression turned to surprise, then anger.

"You! You rotten, bloody bastard, you!"

"Roy? What are you doing here?" the demon's companion muttered, recognizing the man's face.

"I'm paying for your sake, you utter bastard, you! I'm suffering for the bullet I took for you, for the rest of us who died for you! I saw you walk away from the crash, all bloody and weeping! Think I bought it, for even a second?" he screamed and a crow descended, sticking its beak through his neck, drawing blood.

"I…Roy, you were alive?" he muttered.

"We crashed and everyone died, but I burned! I burned and I watched you till my eyes ran down my face, but I saw you smiling! You killed us all, you son of a whore! You killed us all and now we're paying for you!" Roy helplessly tried to shake the crow off his shoulder, even as another landed on his head and pinched an eyelid.

"It wasn't my fault we were shot down. It wasn't my fault you died. The things you did, those are on me, but don't you dare accuse me of killing you, Roy!" the demon's companion screamed against the glass, as the murder of crows descended on the bound man, pecking and clawing and flapping wings. There was a muffled cry and then only silence, as a crow retreated from the mass of his brethren, so it could savor the sinner's tongue in peace.

The demon's companion dug his nails in the exit wound in the back of his head, biting his lip, wishing he could draw blood. Andrealphus patted

him on the shoulder.

"I knew that man" the companion said. "I made him do such awful things, but I did not kill him. I swear I didn't."

"Of course you didn't. You were, after all, shot down by the enemy. Eleven men died, but you survived. You walked away from that twisted pile of metal and they didn't. Simple as that."

"Is that why I'm here? Because of them?"

"Because of a dozen butchers? Of course not! You knew what they were when you were leading them and made them pull the trigger, didn't you? You knew exactly what they'd do, if left unsupervised in a zone filled with unarmed civilians. And you knew how ingenious they would get, when they ran out of bullets. It was only natural that you felt no guilt when they perished in hellfire and you didn't. You're not here because you killed them. You're here because you led them."

"Then why are you showing me this? Why now?" he asked and Andrealphus nodded, leading him further along the corridors of suffering. "Was my suffering not complete enough, after all these years? Was I not a good sinner? Did I not scream, did I not plead enough?" he dogged his guide with questions, but received no reply.

Andrealphus reached another door, set on the floor of the labyrinth; it was a simple trapdoor, a thing of wood with rusted hinges, revealing a spiral staircase, which led down to even greater depths.

He continued his tale. "The gaoler's work, you see, required him to torment and invent torments for other sinners. It made him effective in ways that he could not quite grasp. He was too wrapped-up in his self-loathing to notice that trait in others. He could not understand the tenacity and malice that a man could hold for those that were so much like him."

There was darkness beyond the staircase. Primordial night that was punctuated by the sound of great bodies, spinning on titanic axles. The companion thought he could see, in his mind's eye, the motion of great spheres. He imagined them moving in perfect synchronicity, in unison with the worlds of the firmament.

"But the gaolers relieved him of his burden and left him with all the time in the world in which to wallow in his own pity. And the gaolers had all the time in the world in which to exercise their own self-loathing. A chain of suffering was thus formed, endless and unbroken."

The companion heard the distant flapping of wings, the sound of lungs as big as the world taking in breath. Somewhere below, there was the faintest trace of weeping.

"Do you know what the chief trait of a gaoler is? What makes him stand out from the rest of the damned? It is not his capacity for sin, or the tenacity with which he perpetrated immoral acts when he was alive. It is not even his nature; his drive for evil that he gets from the womb."

The weeping had grown stronger now, subsisted every now and then by roars that seemed to form words in an unknown language. Andrealphus turned to his companion and said:

"It is their acceptance of their situation and their acceptance of guilt. It is the fact that they are perfectly aware of their place and of their actions that led them toward it."

"I don't think I understand…" the companion said.

"What drove you to put those shotgun barrels in your mouth, so long ago? What was it that made you pull the trigger? Was it guilt?"

"Yes."

"Was it guilt for your men's deaths?"

"No. It was guilt for my actions. I knew what I was; had known for a while."

"You were a monster, were you not?"

"Yes."

"You tormented your poor father for the sake of driving him mad, for blaming you of having killed your mother in the womb. You enjoyed making others suffer, did you not? But you were discreet, venomous and twice as effective as the cancer that finally killed them. You took them slowly, every one of them and none of them knew it was you who had killed them until they'd ended up here."

The companion nodded yes. He could not hear the weeping for the hammering of his own guilt, ringing in his ears.

"You were a predator of human lives. What did you do, when you realized it?"

"I…I put the gun in my mouth and I pulled the trigger."

"And when you ended up here, did you weep? Did you moan? Did you claim innocence? Even as the gaolers removed your eyes and peeled back your skin, did you once take what you said back?"

"I did not" the companion said with pride.

“And that is why you are a born gaoler. Tell me: when you saw the sinner on the mountain top, did you feel shame? Remorse? Did you perhaps think him too good for his torment?””

“I found the torment too good for his sins.” the companion said and was surprised at the steel in his voice.

“Would you have imagined a greater one, fashioned to his specifications? One that other gaolers like me may have been unable to invent?”

“I can think of a dozen.”

Andrealphus nodded and walked on. The weeping had begun anew. He led his companion into the dark places below Hell, where the companion saw the first weeping gaoler, witnessed his massive corpus which writhed with agony and saw his sets of eyes that wept a sea of tears. The creature barely noticed him, only stopped for an instant, nodding in agreement to Andrealphus’ terms, before returning to his pitiful reverie.

The dead man was led to strange chambers, where he was made anew: fitted with new skin, new clothes, new brains. He was given a key ring like his own and a name, that the companion decided he would never use and then was sent on his way.

He found Roy and the ten men he’d led in the war. He found his father, who had died a miser and a drunk, poisoned by hatred for his son. He found women that he once knew, boiling in the tar-pits and took them from this place of familiar horror and set them in chambers tailored to their needs.

The new gaoler set himself to work and sang along with the rhythm of their claims of innocence. And it was said that there were none more innocent in all of Hell, no damned more undeserving of their unspeakable torments than those that suffered his attentions.

Konstantine Paradias

is a jeweler by profession and a writer by choice. He knows that this is, of course a terrible idea but he can, like, totally quit it whenever he wants, man. He maintains a writing blog, called Shapescapes and secretly hopes that perhaps one day, they'll let him write for comic books.

Arcticus

Greg McWhorter

Mrs. Gramercy was still getting used to the idea that she was a grandmother. She had been out of the country when her daughter gave birth and missed that very first year with her new grandson. She was back in her hometown now though, and had spent the last two years getting to know her little Charlie. She called him that. His name was really Charles, but she just slipped into using 'Charlie', as is typical with grandparents creating pet names for their grandchildren. Charlie was her first grandchild and she liked to spoil him. Since her husband had passed away, Charlie had become the most important male in her life and she only wanted the best of everything for him. She spent long hours playing make-believe games with him, or tried to teach him simple things like how to make a sandwich and so on. She doted on her grandson and her grandson loved her and trusted her implicitly. Even though her life was now going well back in the states, she still had a little emptiness inside of her for her departed husband.

She thought of her poor husband and how he had died. They were travelling through Germany looking for antiques. They had bought some items from a store just before it closed and were heading back to their hotel, which was about 30 miles away. They were driving through the moonless, nighttime countryside when a rainstorm hit without warning. It had been hard seeing the road ahead of them, But instead of pulling off and waiting the rain out, they decided to push on. Although they drove slowly and cautiously, they were taken by surprise when a large truck came veering at them from around a curve up ahead. Her husband tried to steer their car onto the shoulder while braking, but the car slid and went over the shoulder, careening down an embankment and then coming to rest with a great crash into a small grove of trees. Upon regaining her senses, Mrs. Gramercy found her husband dead, having been impaled upon the shattered steering wheel of the rented car. She also discovered she could not get out of the car, as the doors were all blocked by trees and rocks. She spent a cold, dark night alone with her husband's corpse, in strange a country.

It was almost twelve hours later before anyone found her. By that time, she was half mad from shock and fear. She had spent the whole night staring out at the sky, trying not to look at her dead husband. Noises from the woods added to her fears and escalated them to a fevered pitch, so by

the time morning finally dawned, she was almost a fragment of her former self. Only the thought of never seeing her newly born grandson gave her any strength to retain her sanity. She tried to only think of him as the darkness wore on. A psychiatrist later told her, during therapy, he believed it was her thinking about her grandson that kept her from losing her mental stability that night. Ever since the accident, she feared the dark and things that made noise in the night. When she came back to the United States, she moved in with her daughter's family and made sure to go to sleep early, just as dusk approached, and even slept with a candle or nightlight.

Yes, she thought, *her grandson meant everything to her now that her husband was gone.*

Her thoughts switched from her grandson back to the business at hand as she stepped into the antique store. Living in Maine made it easy for her to find valuable antiques as there were so many old residences in the area. She loved going to estate sales and flea markets, but she had always done her best hunting at those little, out of the way shops, like this one. She had found this store by sheer luck while driving around Wilbraham, and had gotten lost, when she came across this dilapidated shack turned antique store. She thought about how a lot of the best antique stores were in what used to be homes. They were usually not as picked through as regular antique stores because they tended to be away from major downtown areas and tucked amongst residential neighborhoods. *She might really find some great stuff in here*, she thought, as she walked around inside. The shelves were covered in a patina of dust, but she could see that they still held many treasures.

Inside the store she found a lot to look at and much to buy. She was in the business of buying and reselling antiquities. She was constantly on the prowl for antiques which could turn a quick, and hefty, profit. This particular shop was loaded with all kinds of great items, from the pre-Victorian Gothic period, right up to modern day treasures. She weaved through piles of stuff, her eye catching one wonder after another. She saw a pile of old comic books and was tempted to buy the stack, as she knew they could be quite valuable. It turned out they all had horror covers with scenes of torture and she felt more than a little awkward about selling such things to others. She had a difficult time with anything that reminded her of death. Finally she found some Victorian furniture to purchase and some Depression-era glass, along with a few other odds and ends.

She went up to the counter and could not find anyone around. There was a bell and she rang it three times and waited. She turned away from the counter and was considering whether to go outside to see if someone was out back, when a slight noise made her turn around and she found herself staring into the face of a gaunt old man sporting wispy white hair and too many wrinkles who had materialized behind the counter.

"Oh! You startled me. I've been looking around your shop and I just love the things you have here. I would like to buy your Victorian dining set over there with the matching buffet and chairs and…," She proceeded to tell the man everything on her list as he wrote the items on a notepad. Just as she was finishing, she spied a large teddy bear behind the counter resting on a low shelf. The bear looked like an original 1903 Steiff Bear model 55 PB. She knew that these were made in Germany and were supposedly shipped to the U.S., but no one had ever found one here in the states. If it was real, it would be quite a find.

"How much for the cute bear behind you?" She asked with mock innocence.

The man finally broke his silence to wheeze out a reply in a Dutch accent. "It is not for sale."

"Oh come now. I have a grandson that would just adore that bear. It is only going to gather dust here in your shop." She lied, thinking. *If it turns out to be valuable, of course she would sell it*.

"Miss…This bear is not mine to sell."

Mrs. Gramercy tried to get the man to sell it with a few more offers, but he continued to decline. The two settled on a price for the other items she wanted and the old man told her everything would be delivered to the address she had indicated by tomorrow afternoon.

The next day, she was anxiously waiting to receive the antiques and catalog them for sale. She felt she'd gotten quite a great bargain from the old man and decided to pay him a visit in the near future. Around dusk, a beat up truck driven by some younger men drove up and unloaded all of the purchased antiques. The delivery men were quick and she was soon unpacking the items. To her amazement, she found the very Teddy bear that she'd wanted hidden amongst the items. She figured the old man must have had a change of heart and sent it along considering she had made such a large purchase. After carefully examining it, she could not tell if it was a Steiff creation or not. She heard an exclamation behind her and turned in

time to see her grandson running at her. He hugged the bear and begged to keep it in that pigeon English reserved for three-year olds. She decided right then to just let him have it since she could not find the appropriate markings on it anyway. Her grandson squealed and ran off with his prize.

A few days passed and Mrs. Gramercy made a lot of money from the sale of the furniture, as expected. She had not paid much attention to little Charlie, but she did notice how attached he had become to the stuffed bear that was almost as tall as he was. She would come up on him talking to it, or pretending to feed it and so on. Charlie seemed so happy with his new toy that she decided she didn't care if it were valuable or not to collectors; it was worth millions to Charlie, so it was priceless to her as well. She decided to call up the owner of the shop and thank him for sending it along. She went to her phone and called, but a young woman answered the phone instead of the old man. She asked for him, but was told by the woman that the old man, who was her uncle, had been mugged and stabbed to death on his way home a few nights ago. The police were still searching for his killer. Mrs. Gramercy was shocked by this news and she hung up without saying another word. She could not stand hearing about anyone's death. It was too horrible for her as it always brought her back to thinking about her husband, and that night so long ago, when the darkness had touched her mind and she almost lost her sanity.

Mrs. Gramercy tried to get the murder out of her mind as soon as she could by immersing herself in housework. She vacuumed and dusted… anything to get her mind off of death and darkness. Charlie's parents, who shared the big house with Mrs. Gramercy, were busy too as they were preparing for a short business trip. They had made arrangements for Charlie's grandmother to watch him over that weekend while they were away. Normally weekends were an antique dealer's best hunting time, but she loved Charlie and agreed instead to watch him. She did not like being alone anymore since her husband's passing, but Charlie was like a bright ray of sunshine that shown so brightly in her life that he somehow made everything alright for her. She would be fine as long as Charlie was around for her.

The weekend came and Charlie's parents left. The big two-story was left all to Charlie and his grandmother. The weather forecast said a mild storm was coming. As the weekend began, the sky turned grey and gloomy and the wind picked up. For most of Saturday, Charlie just played with his

bear and watched television while his grandmother decided which antiques to put in her shop and which to put online for sale. As night crept up, thunder could be heard in the near distance and the occasional lightning flash lit up the windows. Charlie and his grandmother made a pizza for dinner and sat down to watch a movie. She loved to spoil her grandson whenever she could. About halfway through the movie, the power went out and all that could be heard throughout the home was the sound of the approaching storm. Wind and rain were starting to pelt the darkened house. Charlie and his grandmother were used to storms so that was no cause for alarm, but it was the darkness which continued nagging at Mrs. Gramercy.

Charlie's grandmother promptly lit a candle on the nearby buffet, announcing they should go to bed as it was late anyway. This decision was mostly for her sake, rather than for Charlie's. Her grandson protested, but marched upstairs to his bedroom, dragging his bear along. Mrs. Gramercy took the candle and left the den, heading to the living room where she proceeded to lock the front door before going up the stairs to her bedroom. She had been reading by candlelight and listening to the storm for about half an hour when she heard a shuffling noise in the hallway outside her bedroom.

"Charlie," she called out. "Are you out of bed?" There was no reply. She heard the shuffling sound moving down the hall. She sat up and put on her slippers, then went to her bedroom door and opened it. There was no one in the hallway, but a slight sound made her look in the direction of the stairs. A flash of lightning briefly lit up the house and she saw a small shadow going downstairs. She thought to herself that Charlie might be sleepwalking, so she went downstairs in a panic, afraid he might get hurt.

She almost fell down the stairs because it was too dark and cursed herself for forgetting to take the burning candle with her. When she reached the bottom landing, she could not see a thing and felt as if the darkness was enveloping her. She took a breath and told herself that it was foolish to be scared of a darkened house, but still waited until the next lighting flash so that she could get her bearings. In the brief flash, she saw the living room was empty, so she felt her way down the dark hallway to the den, where they had been watching the movie. Her hands felt along the wall until it dropped off and she finally knew she was entering the den. She was starting to shake a little as she felt her way along the furniture, so she sat down on the couch and waited for the next flash. It quickly lit up the room,

but it too was empty. Realizing in order to quickly find Charlie and relieve her tension, she would need more light. She picked herself off the couch and headed in the direction of the kitchen to search for a flashlight.

Upon entering the kitchen, she remembered that there was a flashlight kept in the pantry. She shuffled toward the direction of where she knew the pantry should be when all of a sudden something sent a searing, stabbing pain into her right foot and she fell down onto the kitchen tiles. She was in a lot of pain as she felt for her foot and cursed the darkness, feeling hot liquid on her foot that must be blood. She had no idea what she had run into, but it had cut her foot open. Holding her foot in the darkness, she waited for another flash of lighting so she would not get hurt again. The flash went off, and*, there*, in that split second, she saw Charlie's Teddy bear shuffling towards her with a carving knife in its hand! Then darkness returned to the kitchen as her short scream pierced through the sound of the storm.

The darkness was like a living thing. Even though she knew she was in danger, it seemed to creep over her and hold her down. Her mind replayed flashes of that dreadful night when her husband perished. The combination of night noises, darkness and blood made it hard for her to breathe. She thought she must be going insane, but focused on the need to protect little Charlie. It was so dark that her eyes seemed useless, but the presence of the evil bear was there with her in the kitchen. She listened carefully and was able to pick up a shuffling sound, like little feet dragging on tile, through the noise of the outside storm. The sound was coming closer!

She was almost too shocked to move, but got up and limped away from where the bear had been towards the den. Once there, she grabbed a lamp from a side table and held it tightly to use as a weapon. She hoped that Charlie was unharmed and still sleeping upstairs when the shuffling sound returned. She realized she must do something to protect him from whatever this thing was. Clutching the brass lamp, she hobbled out of the den and toward the stairs. Just as she made it, there was another flash which showed her the living room and stairs were empty. The darkness returned, and the creaking sound of a door opening came from upstairs. In a panic to protect her grandson she went up the stairs as fast as she could, ignoring the pain in her foot.

When she reached the top of the stairs she immediately proceeded to Charlie's room. The fear of darkness had its grip on her and she gasped for

breath. With one hand touching the wall she limped along until she felt his open bedroom door. She felt her heart beating crazily when the contents of Charlie's room were lit up with a flash. In that brief instant, she saw the bear shuffling closer to Charlie, who was fast asleep in his bed. The carving knife was in its hands as it crept ever closer. Without a moment to lose she screamed, dropped the lamp, ran into the bedroom and grabbed the bear. The bear slashed at her arms and midsection as she struggled to open Charlie's window and throw the bear and knife outside into the storm. She threw the evil toy and the knife out into the deluge and managed to quickly shut and lock the window. Just as she turned to check on Charlie, the power returned and the lights came on. Charlie looked pale and was crying as he saw his grandmother covered in blood, but she went and comforted him and told him she was okay and was glad he wasn't hurt. They held each other and cried as the storm continued to vent its fury. They both were shaking and sobbing as they clung to one another desperately. All she could think of was protecting her grandson, and the return of the lights made her feel stronger in mind and spirit.

After a while, she mustered enough courage, with the lights now on, to take Charlie to her bedroom. Once inside, she locked her door and picked up her phone to call the police, telling them frantically that someone attacked her in her home and she needed medical attention right away. She was smart enough to realize telling them about a killer Teddy bear would sound crazy, so she just said the attacker ran off. The police said they would send help right away. She hung up and decided the two of them would wait safely, with the lights on in her room, until help arrived. Charlie was still sobbing, but unhurt as she put him in her bed. She told him everything would be alright now that the police were coming, so she went to her adjoining bathroom to survey her wounds. She was lucky; most of her wounds were superficial. Her foot was the worst as the downward stab had gone all the way through. She tried to bandage herself up the best she could and was just about to wrap a towel around her foot when the power went out again.

She stumbled her way out of the bathroom with renewed anxiety and called out to Charlie to make sure he was okay.

There was no reply.

The candle she had lit earlier was still burning and it showed her the bedroom was empty and the door was open. She yelled out for Charlie, but

no reply came. She moaned in despair as she limped down the hallway to Charlie's room to see if he went in there. She yelled out for him, only to be met with silence. She went into his room and felt around his empty bed. She happened to glance out of his bedroom window just as another lightning flash occurred and what she saw made her shriek in fear.

The bear was standing on the lawn in the rain, knife in paw, with Charlie running toward it. Ignoring her pain, she rushed outside; the mounting fear of the possibility of Charlie's death was enough to make her heart burst.

She threw open the door, only to come face to face with the dark silhouette of the bear. Its eyes appeared to glow malevolently in the moonlight and it appeared to lunge toward her. Shocked into action and without a second to lose, she managed to grab the carving knife away from the bear's tiny paws, cutting her own hand in the process. With the strength from added adrenaline, she managed to wield the knife and plunged it into the horrific bear. She stabbed and stabbed as tears and nervous sweat mingled down her face.

The night was filled with the echoes of her own shrieks mingled with the distant rumble of thunder. She continued stabbing the bear until she saw that blood was seeping through it and the glow in its eyes appeared to be gone. She stopped and withdrew the knife. The bear slowly slumped forward revealing her grandson Charlie behind it. The lightning lit up the scene and showed Charlie's eyes were glazing over and he stood for only a second before falling face down. Mrs. Gramercy's desperate wail mixed with that of the approaching sirens.

* * *

"How long has Mrs. Gramercy been here at Skyhaven?" Asked the attendant that was carrying the package.

"She killed her grandson a few years back stabbing him repeatedly with a kitchen knife. She has been here in solitary rest ever since. Her own daughter won't have anything to do with her now, so her bills are mostly covered by her sister. Here is her room."

The facility manager unlocked the indicated door and ushered the attendant inside. Mrs. Gramercy was curled up on a bed, in a fetal position.

“Just leave her box on the floor next to her bed.” The manager then addressed the patient. “Mrs. Gramercy. Your sister has finally received approval for you to have a few personal possessions. You will find a blanket and some books in that box.”

With that, both men left the room and re-locked the door behind them. Mrs. Gramercy turned in her bed so that she could see the box. She reached out an arm and flipped the lid off. She saw a quilt inside her mother had made for her long ago. Enthusiasm for fine things worked its way through her devastated psyche and she rose looking eagerly through the box. Underneath the quilt were some paperback books by her favorite authors. There was also a new pillow at the bottom of the box. She pulled out the pillow and put it on her bed along with the quilt. She pulled the quilt over her and lay back on the pillow with one of the books in hand.

She tried to read some of the book, but the pillow was too uncomfortable so she tried to fluff it up,

But still it felt lumpy.

Sitting up she took the pillow in her hands. Noticing that the pillowcase was loose on some parts she pulled out the pillow inside. What she pulled out was not a pillow, but a bloodstained Teddy bear with malevolently glowing eyes! The lights went out as her screams echoed throughout the sanitarium…

Greg McWhorter

is a pop-culture historian and teacher who resides in Southern California. Since the 1980s, he has worked for newspapers, radio, television, and film. He has been a guest speaker at several universities and the San Diego Comic-Con. Today, McWhorter owns a highly acclaimed record label that specializes in vintage punk rock. He is also the host of a cable TV show titled Rock ‘n’ Roll High School 101. Since 1985, McWhorter has been writing nonfiction music-related articles for print and has recently turned to writing crime and horror fiction. McWhorter’s stories have appeared in several anthologies and magazines. He has published work with EC Comics, James Ward Kirk Publishing, Scarlett River Press, Rorshoq Books, A Raven Above Press, Schlock! Press, Source Point Press, Horrified Press,

eFiction Publishing, as well as forthcoming stories for Static Movement, Phrenic Press, and 13Horror, amongst others. He is a member of the Horror Writer's Association and recently had a poem featured on their webpage. You can follow him at: http://gregmcwhorter.blogspot.com

Rêve Noir

Eli Wilde

Adel watched them from across the street. The mother and father walked hand-in hand, like dreamers still in love. Their young son piggy backed on his mother's shoulders. She stared in their direction a long time, even after they were gone. She longed for a child of her own, but had made up her mind never to have any children. How could she be a mother with an ugly past like hers? She crossed the Seine over Petite Pont and walked along Rue Saint- Jacques heading for Rue Dante and the apartment block where the Englishman, Sykes, lived. There was an elevator inside, but Adel hated elevators and climbed the six flights of stairs to Sykes apartment counting the steps one by one as she did. Once outside his door, she rang the bell. He answered almost immediately, like always, as if he had been waiting behind the door for her to arrive.

Sykes kissed Adel on each cheek and she held her breath as he did, not wanting to take in his old man scent. Sykes beckoned her inside and led her to the expansive lounge. The air inside the apartment was cool and airy, a welcome contrast to the Parisian summer outside. She sat in the couch opposite Sykes and he poured her lemon tea while he spoke.

'I want to try something different today, Adel,' Sykes said in a Geordie accent that did not match his upper-class persona.

Adel looked out of the window staring at Notre Dame's steeples, thinking about what she would do if she owned an apartment with a fabulous view like that.

'Everyone is bored with sex. Sex is yesterday's turn on.' Sykes continued.

'What do you mean?' Adel said, suddenly interested in what Sykes had to say.

'I mean my clients, and just about everyone else, want to experience more than a cheap sexual thrill. They want to experience darkness.'

'What kind of darkness?'

'The kind of darkness that feels real.'

'What kind of darkness feels real?'

Sykes interlaced his finger in front of his face and stared at Adel for a moment. 'Don't be nervous. We are still talking about dream sequencing

here. It is still fantasy, but instead of erotic dream sequencing, we are now set up for dark dream sequencing.'

'What's different about the set up?'

Sykes smiled, 'As you know, it is the set up that makes this whole business work. Instead of using individuals who are sexually orientated, we now use individuals who are a lot deeper.'

'Psychopaths and killers, you mean?'

'At first, that's exactly the type of person our clients wanted their dream hosts to represent. Surprisingly, psychopaths don't dream much, even when influenced by the serum. They are actually quite boring. And although killers at first appeared capable of supplying the dark horror we were looking for, they soon became predictable. It's all slash and burn with them.'

'I take it you have found a suitable dream host?'

'Yes, we have a host. And it happened quite by chance. When you think about it, though, it is so obvious it makes you wonder why we didn't think about it in the first place.'

'Who is the host?'

'A priest who has lost his faith in God.'

'He no longer believes in God?'

'No, he still believes in God, he just doesn't agree with God's word anymore. That's what makes him perfect for dark dream sequencing. He is close to God and Satan. He believes in both, yet follows neither.'

'Why would a priest want to become a dream host?'

'The same reason you are in the dream sequencing industry. He needs the money. In truth, when he first came to us, we saw him as a charity case. We didn't see him as host material. As soon as we looked inside his head, everything changed.'

'What is inside his head?'

'A heady mix of confusion, guilt and sin. It makes for fascinating viewing.'

'I still don't understand. Why do you want me to get involved with this scene? I'm a sex fantasist, not a horror freak. I do not do horror.'

'As much as anything, this is for you, Adel. I know about your nightmare. I have seen it in your dreams. I want to erase that particular nightmare from your mind by showing you true darkness. Horror that will make your own nightmare go away forever.'

Adel didn't want to think about her nightmare. She understood that nothing could ever be private in this industry, but she was still annoyed at Sykes for mentioning it. 'What about the observers?'

'What about them?'

'If you are doing this for me, I take it they will not be present?'

'Dream sequencing is an expensive business. I can't do this without their support.'

Adel sighed. 'I'm not sure about this. Why would I want to introduce any more horror into my life?'

'The market has dropped out of the sex industry, I'm not sure you can make a living from it anymore. I am not sure I can, either. We both need to diversify.'

'I don't have a choice, you mean?'

'You always have a choice. You can always say no.'

Adel knew she could not say no, just like she knew Sykes thought the same. There was no other work for a nineteen year old without any qualifications. There was no work for anyone these days that did not involve exploitation.

'Come, it is time,' Sykes said as he stood, holding out his hand for Adel to take. 'You were always my favourite,' he added. 'I know you will be fabulous at this.'

***

The theatre was located in the loft at the top of the apartment block. Sykes rented the space from the building owner and converted it three years ago in response to the lucrative market in dream sequencing. Although there were a large number of public dream sequencing theatres throughout the city, it was the small, private theatres which generated the most interest from wealthy clients. These individuals wanted only the best hosts and dream fantasists. In Paris, there was no better dream fantasist than Adel. She could visualize original scenarios like no one else. She hated her work, but there was nothing else she was good at doing. When she stepped into the theatre she was surprised to see the man she assumed must have been the priest lying on the host bed, already prepared. He slept soundly.

'What is he called?' Adel asked Sykes.

'Thomas Durant.'

‘Why has he been prepared before me?’

‘He was fretful when he arrived; he wanted to sleep immediately.’

‘Is he going to be okay?’

‘Yes.’

Adel started to remove her clothes.

‘That is no longer necessary.’ Sykes said. ‘Just lie down and I will prepare you.’

Adel lay down on the bed next to Durant and Sykes covered her with a single white sheet before fitting the neuro-imaging band on her head. He then attached the imager to the relay station which connected her to Durant, and the four observation booths located behind the soundproof walls opposite the two beds. Adel had never seen any of the observers who watched her dreams. She never wanted to see them.

‘Are you ready,’ Sykes said.

Adel nodded her head in response.

Sykes injected Adel with the serum and a moment later she was sleeping.

***

She awakened inside Thomas Durant’s dream. Although she was sharing his dream, unlike a normal dream state, Adel was aware of everything she experienced as if it was happening for real. The serum had initially been developed by a pharmaceutical giant as a different kind of euthanasia; once it became socially acceptable for terminally ill individuals to choose their exact moment of death. It was supposed to induce euphoria before death.

During trials with lower doses of the serum, the researchers found that it induced incredibly realistic dreams without any apparent side effects. A brain surgeon took the experiments one step further when he coupled the serum with neuro-imaging technology and made it possible for people to not only share their dreams with each other, but also make it possible for observers to watch dreams via monitors. Dream sequencing became the product of those experiments.

The first thing Adel noticed inside Durant’s dream was the heat. Wildly intense, it felt like someone was pressing the tips of lit cigarettes into every inch of her skin. As the neuro-imager began to feed pictures of

the dream into her mind, Adel saw that she was inside a cell. The walls of the cell were terribly rusted and the barred metal doorway was rusted, too. She tried to move, to crawl towards the doorway, but her muscles felt dead and her body weight seemed to draw her towards the concrete floor, and keep her there. She could barely breathe the hot air inside the cell and her lungs began to ache violently as she gasped for a breath that was not there. Staring at her arms, she was appalled to see them blister and her skin start to burn away from her flesh. As the heat intensified, she could bear no more and passed out.

***

The sound of wailing awakened her and opening her eyes, Adel saw that she was still inside the cell but no longer alone. A hunched creature with grotesque, burnt away features sat opposite her, clearly distressed. It was twice her size and moved its head from side to side as it moaned. When it saw she was awake, it crawled towards her and started to chew her fingers. Adel tried to scream, but there was no air inside her lungs. Unable to move, she could do nothing else other than watch the creature as it chewed off her fingers, one at a time.

'We need to leave this place,' a voice said from the other side of the doorway.

Adel looked towards the voice and saw a man staring back. Like her, the man had suffered from severe burns. His skinless, bloodied flesh glistened red and only half of his right arm remained. His nose and ears were missing too and Adel was not sure if it was because they had burned away, or instead been gnawed off by a creature similar to the one now chewing on her fingers.

'Durant?' Adel managed to say.

'Yes.'

'You crazy fuck…get us out of here.'

'I don't know how to.' Durant said.

Adel stared beyond Durant and saw a cell identical to the one she was locked inside. A form that she couldn't make out to be either man or woman was sandwiched between two creatures performing hideous sexual acts. Adel wanted to close her eyes but she had no eyelids and it was at that moment she felt a chemical droplet fall inside her mind. When the chemical

neurotransmitter landed, the cell and the heat disappeared and she found herself within another dream.

***

Adel almost passed out again with the shock of no longer feeling the sensation of pain. She was sitting on a bench in the middle of a school playground. A small boy no more than six or seven years old sat next to her. The other children were circling the bench and from time to time they bent towards the boy and flashed their phones in front of his face. Adel didn't need to see the phones to know what the images on the screens were. She knew the children were showing the little boy pictures of his mother. His mother with a man who was not his father. With lots of men who were not his father. All of the men were ugly and old. All of the men were having sex with his mother.

'Make them stop, mummy,' the boy said, turning towards Adel and weeping. 'Make them stop and tell me it's not true.'

Adel hugged the boy and whispered, 'Durant, get me out of here.'

***

Durant did as she asked and they found themselves back in the hot place, in a labyrinth of tunnels with jagged walls that looked like crooked teeth had gnawed them into existence. The heat was oppressive, but not as intense as it had been in the cell. Durant sat beside Adel. They were propped up against a tunnel wall, unable to move. Both of them looked like they had been scorched with a blow torch. Pieces of their body parts were missing.

'Was that your son?' Durant asked in a voice barely audible.

Adel heard screams coming from every tunnel opening around her. 'No,' she said, wincing at the pain in her dry throat as she attempted to talk. 'He is my nightmare.'

'Why did you take us to him?'

'I don't know. We are supposed to remain in the host's dreams. Sometimes; only on rare occasions, we find ourselves in the dream fantasists head. No one can explain how or why it happens'

'Who is the boy?'

‘The son I will never have.’

‘Are you sterile? Is that why you can’t have children?’

‘No, I’m not sterile. I choose not to have children. I do not deserve to have a child. I would never want to put a child of mine through what happened in that playground.’

‘Why would that happen to a child of yours?’

‘There are many images of me throughout the world. I have been a dream sequencer too long.’

Two of the creatures like the one she saw in the cell approached. They held a woman between them, scraping her bare flesh against the wall as they carried her along the tunnel and into another one where they then disappeared from view. The woman’s screams were soon lost inside the screams of innumerable others who suffered along with her.

‘Where are we and what are we doing here?’ Adel asked.

‘This is my nightmare,’ Durant said. ‘A place shown to me by someone I no longer worship.’

Another creature came running out of one of the tunnels. It held onto its head and crashed from wall to wall, wailing as it rushed past them.

‘What are those things?’

‘They are demons.’

‘Demons? Why do they look as tormented as the humans? Surely this is the one place where they should feel at home.’

‘There is no ease for anyone or anything in this place. It is meant to torment both human and demon alike.’

‘You’re the host. Take us someplace else.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know any other place.’

‘You know Paris.’

‘Yes, but not in my dreams. I can only see this place in my dreams. Can’t you take us away from here like you did before?’

‘No, I told you, only the host can control the places we see.’

A finger appeared in the ground opposite Adel’s leg as she spoke. It wriggled out of the dark soil and another finger appeared alongside it. A moment later, the fingers were joined by a hand and then an arm. The hand crawled towards Adel’s leg until a shoulder appeared and then the head of a

demon. Seeing Adel, the demon grabbed hold of her leg and as Adel stared in horror, she noticed her foot was missing.

The demon pulled her toward it and she could do nothing but watch.

'I want to go to Notre Dame!' Adel said, 'Take me to Notre Dame, Thomas, please!'

'I can't.'

'Yes, you can, just imagine we are there and we will be.'

'I can't remember what it looks like; all I know is this place.'

The demon started to pull Adel into the ground.

'Forget about how it looks, think about how it feels. How it smells. Think about something inside the cathedral that made you feel euphoric. There must be something!'

The demon pulled so hard on Adel's leg that it broke her thigh bone in half. She screamed, hardly making a sound. She wanted to hit the demon, but couldn't. It was like the air was so heavy and her muscles too weak, it stopped her from moving at all. The demon grabbed hold of her other leg and snapped that in half too. Wrapping her legs around its arm, it pulled her beneath the soil until only her head and left arm remained above the surface of the ground. She stared at Durant just as the demon pulled the rest of her beneath the surface.

***

And then she was sitting on a bench, next to Durant inside Notre Dame. She took a lung full of air, then another. All of the heat had vanished. All of the pain had vanished. She wanted to weep. Instead, she continued to breathe in the cool air inside the cathedral.

'How did you do it?' she eventually asked Durant. 'What did you remember?'

'I remembered the sound of my footsteps echoing around the empty space when I was alone in the cathedral at the end of each day.'

Adel stared at the people inside the cathedral. She listened to their footsteps as they moved around. 'Tell me about the hot place.' She said, sometime later.

'You really want to know?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I was taken there by God, six months ago.'

‘In a dream?’

‘It didn’t feel like a dream at the time. Just as it is with dream sequencing, it felt life-like. One minute I was here saying mass. The next I was inside a pit of fire, burning alongside other people. After being shown the fate of sinners, I came to on the floor of the cathedral. I had been unconscious for only a minute or so but it felt like I had been away for days.’

‘Did God speak to you?’

‘Not in the sense you are thinking. He speaks in a more visual way, by placing images inside your mind.’

‘What did he say to you? Why did he take you there?’

‘He wanted to show me the fate of sinners so that I in turn would return and warn those who cared to listen.’

‘Did you warn anyone?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘After I returned I no longer believed in God’s ways. I thought He was insane. What other explanation is there for creating a world where sinners are exiled to an everlasting afterlife in unbearable torment. By sinners, I mean those who do not follow the word of God. A sinner could be a perfectly loving mother who has done nothing but care for her children all her life without hurting another soul. Yet because she does not believe in God, she spends eternity burning in a place of His making. Does she really deserve to spend thousands of years after thousands of years screaming in a place like that? Does anyone? I can’t see the sense in it, especially after seeing that place with my own eyes and experiencing its relentless pain.’

‘I have never believed in God.’

‘You need to start believing, He is real. You have some choices to make.’

‘What kind of choices?’

‘Choices that will determine how you spend your afterlife.’

‘You mean I need to start believing in God?’

‘You need to not only believe in Him, you need to worship Him and follow His word. If you do not, that hellish place awaits.’

‘You are telling me to worship God not because it is the right thing to do, but because I will go to hell if I do not?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s fucked up.’

‘It is God’s way.’

‘What about you? If you no longer believe in His word, you know what that means…’

‘Since He showed me His hell, I can’t believe in Him anymore.’

‘Even though His hell awaits you?’

‘It’s like I have no choice. My spirit has turned away from God. I can no longer endure Him or His ways.’

Notre Dame began to fade from the peripheral of Adel’ s vision and she recognised the dream shift. ‘Thomas, for God’s sake concentrate,’ she yelled, but it was too late. The cathedral vanished and the hot place returned.

***

‘I can’t live any longer.’ Durant said.

They were hanging upside down. Adel stared up at her feet and saw she was suspended by a metal rod that had been spiked through both of her ankles. The pain was sickeningly extreme.

‘I injected myself with a dose of serum before Mr Sykes injected me with another dose for this dream sequence.’

Adel was glad Durant had taken a double dose of the serum, she wanted him to die. She wanted the pain to stop.

‘How could you do that? You know this place will become your reality after you die.’ She managed to say.

‘It is already my reality. Once you find this place, it never leaves you.’

A demon approached. It carried hot coals in its arms. It winced and moaned in pain as the coals burnt its arms and chest. When it reached them it forced hot coals into Durant’s mouth. He passed out almost immediately and the demon then forced hot coals into Adel’s mouth. She lost consciousness after the second hot coal was pushed into her mouth.

***

The demon lay on the ground when Adel next awakened. Its chest had burned away where it had been holding the hot coals. She coughed up three still burning coals from her mouth. Staring across at Durant, she saw

that he looked lifeless beside her. She remembered what he said about taking a double dose of the serum and wondered if he was dead yet. She realised he couldn't be dead though, because she was still inside his dream. In a moment of panic, she thought that he had died and she was now trapped inside his dream. When he moaned a moment later, she cried out in relief.

Unable to move or speak, she remained suspended upside down for what seemed like days, wishing Durant would die so that her torment would end. When it started to darken, she knew he was about to die. She had only experienced death once before inside a dream, when a host in a gimp mask had a heart attack while brutally sexing Adel in a Japanese S&M torture house.

She *knew* what to expect from death.

The darkness began to expand from the edges of her vision, moving inwards. It shifted slowly at first, like twilight patiently turning into night, but soon quickened its pace until only a small circle of light remained before her eyes. When the light became a tiny pinprick, total blackness quickly descended and Adel heard shallow breathing inside the blackness. Not her own breathing, not even Durant's. It lasted only a brief moment, until absolute silence deafened her into unconsciousness.

***

Adel awakened with a shock and saw Sykes standing over her.

'Durant is dead,' he said.

Adel didn't need to be told.

'You will have to stay for the investigation.

She got up from the bed, and walked towards Durant. She kissed him on the forehead.

'The ambulance and police are on their way.'

Adel walked over to the door, opened it and closed it behind her. She left the apartment block and made her way to Notre Dame. It was late and she just made the last admissions. Inside the cathedral she made her way to the bench she had shared with Durant in his dream. She listened to the footsteps the few people still inside made. She wept silently to herself.

She never wanted to leave the cathedral.

***

Durant's hell became a global phenomenon. The masses watched his dream on their TV screens over and over without pause. Even after repeat viewing, its power did not wane. They begged Adel to become a dream host so they could understand more about the hot place. To know more about God. Adel refused to work in the dream sequencing industry ever again. She started to follow God's word. She did not follow His word because she thought it was the right thing to do. She followed His word because she was frightened of ending up in the hot place.

She desperately wanted a child. She wanted to love and to feel the love only a child of her own could give her. She would never bring a child into the world. Not because she was fearful of her child being tormented in a school playground. She was fearful of her child being tormented in God's playground.

Eli Wilde

When he was very young, Eli Wilde used to write stories in class about aliens who pretended to be angels, but something happened to stop him continuing to write. He can't remember what went down, all he knows is that it was a very long time before he picked up a pen and started writing again. Since he started writing again his published books include Cruel and Four Days - the first two parts of the Strangers in Paradise trilogy. The third part of the trilogy is due for publication in 2014 with indie publishers PMMP.

Virtual Black

Todd Nelsen

1

Anders waited for his next client to arrive.

It was a patient kind of wait. The kind a man has when he puts the final touches to a house of playing cards. He lifted the cuff of his shirt and glanced down to his wristwatch, checking the minutes. It was mid afternoon, 3:34 to be exact. He'd arrived precisely 34 minutes before, one hour ahead of schedule. The park remained more or less empty. This was peculiar, considering the mildness of the day; the weather was an even burst of bright sunshine, not a single drop of rainfall. It was Saturday. *So where were all the people?* He thought. *Where were the laughing children? The dog walks? The young lovers on their afternoon strolls?* His time here was not completely without incident, at least. 13 1/2 minutes before, on the dot, a lone jogger darted passed. Anders knew this to be true because he clocked it. Before that, seconds after he came to the park bench, he spotted a flock of birds, geese, flying directly overhead. He clocked them, too, and mentally stored the information. He'd ceased, many years before, jotting the events to paper. Not only was this helpful in avoiding unwanted attention, but it was useful in storage and encoding.

"A direct line *is* a direct line," his predecessor said, matter-of-factly. "Record the important events, Anders, the events that matter. Ignore the rest. You're being redundant."

Anders disagreed, at first, stating memory is too fragile, that what is stored in the long term is more reliant on what we choose to remember, as opposed to what others might consider important (who were we to judge what people found entertaining?). Later, he learned, of course, they'd chosen him for this work for this very reason.

Anders attention to detail was uncanny; he noticed all of it.

The paint of the park bench was starting to crack, for example. The jogger wore white shoes. The geese flew in a v shaped formation (they looked like a squadron of honking, WWII fighters, when he thought about it). But there was more to what he saw, too. The paint was indeed cracked, but the cracks weren't uniform. They were unevenly spaced, peeling less toward the foot and the middle of the bench than at the top and the edges.

The jogger's shoes were white, true, but not only white. The left shoe was scuffed, blackened near the toe. The shoelace was loose. The geese, eleven of them in all, were 3 1/2 trees distant from the ground; one was falling behind the rest, caught in the full force of the gale, high above him.

What amazed Anders most was how the input he received would later unfold. Upon upload, the input processed backwards, like a master tape on rewind. He wouldn't remember any of this, he knew, only his training and the foreknowledge that there was more to come.

He glanced to his wristwatch, again. It was a minute past . His client was officially late. He bent down, picked up the duffle bag at his feet, and placed it on his lap. Unzipping it, he produced a folded sheet of white paper. The typed print read as follows:

Name: Jonathon O'Rielly
Age: 36
Height & Build: Moderate & Slim
Eye & Hair: Brown
Residence: City of New Denver
Occupation: Banker
Time & Place: 4 PM, River Front Park
Method for Storage: Gunshot or Strangulation

Other than a picture (the man appeared much older than any 36 he remembered), no further information was provided. Anders found it surprising he brought the dossier along to begin with. With a single glance, 3 hours previous, he was able to recall every detail, from the dimple in his client's chin, to the awkward bend of his client's nose.

"You the gentleman I'm suppose to meet?" Anders placed the dossier back in the duffle bag, zipping it shut. The voice didn't startled him. He'd clocked the footsteps 6 seconds ago.

"You're late," Anders said. "Follow me."

"You sure you can make this look legit? I have a family to consider."

"I can make it look like anything you want, Mr. O'Rielly," then added, "as long as it remains within the perimeters of the agreement."

"Sorry, I'm a little nervous."

"Follow me," Anders repeated.

Clients had various reasons for contacting the V.I.D. Some were terminally ill or mentally unstable. Others, as appeared to be the case with Jonathon O'Reilly, contacted it for monetary gain. An unfortunate few were bought in, selected, by local law enforcement or interested parties. All clients shared one characteristic in common, however.

Once they made the acquaintance of Anders Nicoli Castellanos, there was no chance for negation... they were storage.

2

"Good work, Anders. Systematic and clean, as always. Any problems?"

"None." Anders removed the straps from his ankles and stood to his feet, rubbing the temples behind his eyes. "How long was my upload?"

"Nearly two hours. Your memory of the events should be gone within the hour," the retrieval tech said. "I suggest at least three to four hours of sleep. Plenty of fluids. Avoid alcohol for the next few days. You know the routine."

"Will do." Anders replied. "By the way…," Anders pointed to the monitor.

"Him?" the tech asked. Anders nodded but didn't look. "Gambling debt. I hear he owed the Consortium a tidy sum of money. Guess he figured he could take the easy way out, huh?" The tech chuckled.

Anders proceeded to button his shirt. The Consortium was one thing (they were downright dirty, in fact), but in his line of work, it never went down easy.

3

The V.I.D... an acronym for Virtual Information Display. The V.I.D... a conglomerate of interested parties who elected to remain unnamed. The V.I.D... the ultimate form of entertainment.

The V.I.D. existed in essence but not in actual fact. The vital elements were there: sight, taste, hearing, smell, touch... acceleration, balance, relative position, pain, temperature. And these could be adjusted to various frequencies with editing. A user could replay the V.I.D. at half speed, if he so desired, to relish a moment. The V.I.D. could be paused or fast-

forwarded to a specific event for expediency. But, in the end, the V.I.D. required no active involvement from the user. The end result depended largely on the storage tech. The storage tech was the focal point, the catalyst, for the overall experience. If Anders experienced excitement or anger, the user would, too. If Anders stopped for an arti-burger and fries or an afternoon shit along they way, they'd be sure to experience it. It mattered little the user didn't have the freedom of choice once connected. This was never the point. It wasn't a computer simulation or a video game. The V.I.D. was marketed as an authentic experience, beyond the artificial, and this is what Anders was paid to deliver. Anders was one of the few operators qualified for the work. According to last count, there were only 3,500 storage techs worldwide.

"Gotta fiver, fella?"

Anders reached into his pocket and produced two, shiny coins. A "fiver," as the man called it, wasn't worth much these days, and two quarters (regardless of how shiny) were worth even less. It was like handing a hungry elephant a peanut.

"Will this do?" Anders smiled.

The wino hesitated, took a "why don't ya piss on me some more?" look at the quarters, and wheeled on.

Anders continued walking.

In the beginning, clients were selected. At this time, kill storage, as it was commonly called, was illegal, though most considered it highly profitable and worth the risk. Such underground classics as "Homeless Gutted with Knife" and "Cheating Housewife Strangled with Cord" came from this earlier period. It was realized early on, however -- and after the involvement of various, law enforcement agencies -- more humane standards of conduct were necessary. Clients would have to be willing clients to participate, free denizens in what was quickly becoming a new, world order. Nonetheless, in the year following, there remained legitimate grounds for V.I.D. selection. Such undesirables as being a cutthroat, a thief, a pedophile, a rapist, were reason enough for most. All that was required was proof there were minimal chances for rehabilitation. A variance of 1.5% was considered standard in most cases. Selectees comprised the most violent of cases; hence, they were often the most sought after in the kill markets. They had no say in when, where, or how storage would occur. It

was an all-you-can-eat buffet when it came to the storage of a selectee, and everybody wanted in.

Anders had stored a fair amount of these.

For others, the process was less obtrusive. Sites for storage were arranged and agreed on. Most chose three or four. Clients never knew which site a storage tech would choose, of course, but they had some idea (O'Reilly had probably been stalking the park for days). There was a twofold reason for this change. First, it left little room for error. If a client arrived on site, and on schedule, the deal was sealed. Second, it was noticed clients were more manageable and agreeable with planning. Some even arranged living wakes with family and friends beforehand. It became its own religion, in a way. If you were sick of living, tired of debt, wanting to get your family ahead, contact the V.I.D.... and carry out your affairs accordingly. The V.I.D. would take care of the rest.

Satisfaction guar-an-teed.

There was a healthy amount of celebrity that went along with becoming a client. This offered added incentive. Sponsors. Interviews. The occasional book deal (people still read, though its popularity was declining). Anders didn't particularly like this aspect of the job -- it made it more difficult on his end -- but he tolerated it. Once the V.I.D. went global, and became a product of commerce and trade, slogans such as... JUST DO IT!... or... IS IT IN YOU?... became commonplace in most homes. Though all denied any direct involvement, many corporations actively supported the V.I.D. and integrated it into their own marketing strategies.

As for the method of storage, it was non-negotiable. The V.I.D. offered a wide array of choices to the client, but the final decision was left to the discretion of the storage tech at hand. In the case of Jonathon O'Rielly... age 36, moderate height and slim build, brown hair, brown eyes... Anders selected strangulation.

To put it bluntly, he lured O'Rielly to the wooded area of the park and urged him to run.

4

It takes 3 minutes for death to occur via strangulation, shorter, if a ligature is used.

Anders opted for both.

5

As Anders casually strolled passed 8th and Sims, he was already starting to forget the events of the last 8 hours. Impressions were all he had now; even these, would be gone soon. The sensation of a chase... acceleration. Hands on soft tissue... touch. An intake of breath... sound. The coolness of shade... temperature. There were emotional responses, as well, but they were often the first to go. He couldn't recall these now; too much time elapsed. Anders was trained to emote responses on his own. He could induce sexual excitement and arousal; it didn't matter if the client was male or female (Anders, himself, didn't claim to be gay or straight and expressed little interest in sex). He could bring himself to extreme anger, jealousy, even sympathy, at the drop of a hat. On occasion, the dossier would dictate what Anders should feel, how to color the storage, so to speak. Other times, it was left to his own discretion. Anders was an actor, in many ways, and more. He not only gave a performance. He lived it.

Anders Castellanos was also trained to kill.

He walked a few more blocks, turned west, and entered the largest building of the Upper End, the most expensive of the district. It was 9:21. The custodian of the property gave him a nod. Anders nodded back. Then he stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the seventh floor.

By the time he reached it –

A sealed envelope. Inside, a white sheet of paper. On it, words but they were hazy -- smeared ink on the foreground. In the days following, the balance in his account would rise considerably. It would remain the only evidence of what transpired. The V.I.D. safeguarded its storage techs with complete anonymity. If suspicions were aroused, Anders was instructed to inform others he was a wealthy bachelor, the sole beneficiary of a sizable inheritance. In reality, Anders had no family; no ties. And he preferred to keep it this way.

"Lights."

The apartment was well furnished, plush, with the extravagances of modern living. It had been this way for nearly a year now. A visiting V.I.D. rep politely hinted to Anders, one morning, he should at least try to make some effort to keep up the appearance of living a well-to-do life ("You have the money, buddy. So why not spend it?"). If Anders had any say in the

matter, he would have been perfectly content with his bed, a chair, and a small table. Still, in the interest of anonymity (and the V.I.D., of course), he consented. He did have a fascination for one thing tangible, however; one might consider it an obsession.

Clocks, of varying shapes, colors, and sizes adorned the apartment walls. In the living room, alone, there were twelve (an appropriate number, he thought). In his bedroom, nine. He kept his most valuable pieces in a mechanized strongbox, safe behind the picture above his bed.

Anders had once read:

The measurement of time, dating back to the sundial, is man's greatest and oldest achievement. With it, we record the passing of centuries, millennia. Yet, time's measurement is not immutable; it need not go on forever. Time exists... because we, its creators, exist.

Anders found the thought comforting. For him, time was the one sure thing he had. It was his slam dunk into the ass end of the universe. The movement of sun and moon. The progress of the outer galaxies. The beating of a heart. In attoseconds, man learned to offer sense to the senseless and provide place where place didn't belong. If the clocks ever stopped their ticking, well, that would be it, wouldn't it?

Record the important events, Anders, the events that matter.

Anders removed his coat, ate a light meal, and went to bed.

6

At 3:07 AM, Anders woke to the buzzing sound of his door. He stood to his feet, reached for a robe, and crossed the living room. He had been asleep for 4 hours. Without bothering to check the caller (only a fool with a death wish would fuck with a storage tech), he buzzed the doors, unbolted the lock, and opened them. Within moments, before him stood a man he didn't recognize.

Considering the hour, and the fact nobody ever visited --

"Anders, we have a problem."

7

“Rogue?”

“Well, it’s an outdated expression, but I do think that about sums it up. Cora has gone rogue.” His visitor (who he knew now to be a Mr. Heywood) ran a solitary finger across the edge of his glass, in thought, then turned it up to his mouth and downed what remained of its contents.

“This is good, Anders. What is it?”

Anders reached for the glass and poured him another. “Macallan.”

Heywood laughed. “You’re kidding, right? Isn’t that about 25 Gs a bottle?”

Anders shrugged. Honestly, he could care less how much it cost. He didn’t drink the shit. He kept it around, like most everything else in the apartment, to keep up appearances for the V.I.D.

“Remind me to visit more often,” Heywood said, taking the glass.

After having known him for little more than 10 minutes, Anders decided he didn’t like Heywood. There was nothing necessarily wrong with the V.I.D. rep. He was just too easy, too casual, for his taste. Like most in his position, Heywood probably used his easiness to hide his own incompetence. In Ander’s line of work, this could get a tech hurt or even killed.

“Tell me more about Cora.”

The V.I.D. rep placed the glass on the table and reached into his breast pocket, producing an envelope. Anders knew it well. It was the same type of envelope used for assignment. The off-white of the paper was unmistakable. Heywood rummaged through its contents and handed Anders a photograph.

“May I?” Heywood asked, reaching for a cigarette.

Anders nodded and took the photo.

She was attractive, as far as the female form went. This wasn't surprising, considering the advances and popularity of cosmetic alteration these days. Dark hair. Slim build. Young, in her early twenties. She looked like a girl fresh out of high school, somebody’s daughter, and hardly had the look of a hardened tech. As the old adage went, however, appearances could be deceiving.

“What’s her present location?” he asked, digesting the input.

“Unknown,” Heywood said. “Cora was last seen on site with client...,” he reached into the envelope and produced a sheet of paper, “...

146. On Franklin and 4th, the lower East end. It says, there is an old theater there. Do you know it?"

"Yes," Anders replied. He knew it well. "It's called the Marquis." It was one of the few venues that continued to entertain audiences with the films of the previous decades, been doing so for the last 50 years. There were very few of them left these days, though a small number of artists and history-types frequented the theaters well enough to keep the reels turning.

"What about the storage?"

"146 was discovered the next morning. He'd received severe trauma to the neck, chest, and head. It's doubtful a bludgeoning instrument was used (which meant she used her hands, Anders thought). A protein vendor found 146 in a back alley, eighteen blocks from kill site."

"Cold?" Anders already knew the answer.

"Cold," Heywood repeated. "It appears our young Cora lured 146 from site and disposed of him in that alley. Judging by the number of injuries, and the trauma involved, it must have taken her some time. It was good work, Anders," Heywood said, with no small amount of admiration. "I would like to have seen it."

Anders placed the photo on the table, ignoring the man's enthusiasm. He now had a face to go with the name, and a name to go with the face, and no longer required it.

"Perhaps Cora ran into difficulty," he said. "She may not have had a choice."

"Doubtful," Heywood said. "She never made it to retrieval. She never dialed in for clean up. And considering the violence (Anders had the distinct impression he was simply rehashing the logic of the men who sent him here) I see no other way to call it." He placed the envelope on the table, alongside the photo, and returned to his glass. "Know what the punch line is?"

Heywood eased himself forward on the couch and smiled. It was an offhand attempt at humor, Anders thought, and he decided he wouldn't be offering the V.I.D. rep another glass of Macallan. He didn't mind the nature of the joke (146 was pummeled to death... get it?); he just didn't find it funny.

"Enlighten me," Anders replied.

"If Cora never made it to retrieval," Heywood said, "that means Cora now has the storage." He raised a finger and tapped his head to illustrate.

“And if Cora has the storage --”

“She remembers the kill,” Anders finished.

"Exactly."

8

Cora Black gave the knob of the steel door a turn. She was dressed in brown, synthetic leather, from neck to toe. At a mere 5'5", she didn't present the image of a hardened killer. As Anders suggested, however, appearances could be deceiving. Over the years, Cora learned to use the illusion of her diminutive size to her full advantage. Pity the unfortunate few who second-guessed it.

With the turn of the knob, the door opened.

“Hallelujah,” she whispered.

The word just came to her, as most things did. What did it mean? Where did she hear it? She didn't know. It could have implied taking a flying leap into a vat of strong acid, for all she knew. Still, she thought it might have come from an earlier time, when things were different and less complicated.

Considering the day she was having --

She took a furtive glance back into the alley (it was empty; she wasn't followed) and entered the building.

The sight greeting her was the usual assortment of smut and filth; it appeared to be getting worse the further south she drifted. Cora was in the lower, East end now, sixteen miles from kill site. She didn’t like being this close -- she felt exposed -- but she didn’t have a choice. Despite her protests, her contact was unrelenting, in this regard. Judging by what lie beyond the door, she’d arrived to the very heart of the slums, it seemed; trash and debris littered the floor; the mattress of an old box spring lay in the far corner (it looked liked the last occupant used it for a toilet); she could detect the faint smell of -- was that vomit?

Fucking dregs, she thought.

She shouted out once. Twice.

Other than the muffled echo of her own voice, the room was empty. She removed the leather straps of the bag from her shoulders (it contained a change of clothes, a viber phone, and the latter half of a protein solid) and walked to the furthest corner of the room.

Home, sweet, home.

If it were yesterday, or the day before, she would have barricaded the door. The thought of some guttersnipe making a grab for her as she slept infuriated her. God help them, if they tried. She'd break a bone or two, if it came down to it. She was certain the authorities weren't contacted, at least. She sensed her former employers exhibited the necessary restraint, and besides, it wouldn't have done them a bit of good. Cora covered her tracks. If there was going to be pursuit, it would come from the V.I.D., itself, and she was confident she could handle it. Barkley trained her, after all, and Barkley was the best in the business. Unless (she experienced something akin to fear) --

What if they sent Barkley?

Cora quickly buried the thought, took the viber phone from her bag (untraceable, by all accounts, the vendor said), and made the call.

9

"I won't kill for you."

You're not expected to.

"I won't solicit my body, either. I'm not a prostitute."

Not a requirement.

"So what is it you want from me?"

Information.

"I'll be protected?"

Protection is what we offer, Cora.

"Where? When?"

Remain where you are. We will come to you. 3 PM.

(click)

The Consortium was more elusive than the V.I.D., it seemed. All the same, a little secrecy and confidentiality could go a long way.

It'd got her this far, hadn't it?

She took a look about at the filth of the room and snorted.

Suck it up, Cora. You'll have contact within the hour.

10

The Consortium's roots ran deep, though she wasn't sure how deep. In the beginning, it was a loose net of clans, organized beneath a thin veil of Sicilian "moral" conduct. Somewhere along the line, however, things began to change. Where before, mob bosses were the dividing line, caretakers took their place. These, caretakers, in turn, formed alliances. Once the Japanese *Ninkyō Dantai* and Russian *Bratvas* got wind of what was happening –

This was many years ago.

Many believed the tripartite system was a reaction to the changing climate of the early part of the 21st century. Laws had grown too stringent, punishment too severe. Survival for the criminal underground, the world over, meant strength in numbers and numbers meant immunity.

The rules of the Consortium were simple. Such cursory items as "don't screw your neighbor's wife" and "respect your appointments" were at the top of that list. Cora had little problem with these and felt she could abide by them. No sweat. She didn't intend on coveting much of anything in the near future, beyond her own freedom, and keeping appointments was common courtesy. And then, of course, there was *regola numero uno*, rule number one, and why she contacted the Consortium to begin with:

The Consortium had absolutely NO dealings with the V.I.D.

11

At precisely 3 PM, the door opened.

12

Cora stood to her feet, dusting herself off. "You certainly didn't take your time getting here, consort," she said. "If I had known you were coming this soon, I would have tidied the place up a little. Can I get you anything? No? I still have half a protein in my bag and a dried up banana peel I found under a dirty mattress about an hour ago. Maybe you'd like –"

The man before her removed his suit jacket and neatly folded it over.

"So," she clapped her hands together, eyeing the jacket he placed at the foot of the door, "where to?"

"I have a few questions for you first, Cora, if you don't mind."

"Do I have a choice?"

“I’m afraid not,” the consort smiled. If the smile was meant to put her at ease, it didn't. It didn’t help matters he now stood directly between herself and her only means of exit, either. There was but one window in the room, and it, too, was behind him. “May I?"

“Is that your first question, consort? Do you need permission?”

He ignored her. “Tell me about your last client, Cora,” he said, "client 146."

“That’s none of your, damn business,” Cora replied, taken back. "That life is behind me now. I wouldn’t have made contact, if it were otherwise." Her voice turned even, static. “I’m off the grid. I want to make that clear.”

The consort nodded, to acknowledge he understood -- or heard her, at least -- and continued. “What led you to us, Cora?”

“Well, let’s see.... I’ve spent the last, two years of my life working for corporate thugs and with blank spots eating at my brain?” Cora said. "Is that reason enough?"

"Could be reason enough," the consort said.

“I'll say! Do you know what that’s like?”

“I have some idea.”

“I’m not sure you do. How could you?”

“My own responses are irrelevant, Cora. I’m not the one being questioned.”

Cora sighed. From one, despotic, shit hole into another, she thought. “Shouldn’t you be writing this down. Recording it in some way?”

Again, he ignored her. “Blank spots. Tell me more about these.”

“A blank spot, a life erased. I don’t know what else to call it. Retrieval calls it storage. You may call it something else. I call it a blank spot.”

“Your clients... they came to you willingly, did they not?”

“Some did, not all.” Cora wasn’t certain of this, however. Her former employers had kindly relieved her of this information. “Wait, I thought you guys didn’t agree with the V.I.D.,” she said suspiciously.

“It is not an issue of agreement, Cora. I'm not here to pass judgment." For some reason, Cora doubted this. "Let’s talk a little more about your time as a storage tech. Are you saying you developed a conscience when it came to your work?”

She stared back at him, blankly. She noticed the consort's eyes were the color of her own, a deep and vibrant green. "146... I did it to remember," she said, flatly, looking away.

"To remember the kill, you mean."

Cora nodded.

"And remembrance is somehow crucial to your understanding?"

Cora paused, thinking. "You could say that." Yeah, that sounded about right.

"And the pain and suffering you inflicted on 146?" The question felt less like a question and more like an accusation.

Cora was already tired of this.

"What about it?" she replied. "With 146's death on my hands, the memory of the kill safeguards against future infringement on my part. It means I won't kill again. It's one of the primary reasons the V.I.D. eradicates the memory to begin with, I think. My response was rational. I don't expect you to understand it."

"Impressive. Sounds utilitarian --"

"Call it whatever you want," she said. "I did what was *necessary*."

13

"Tell me about your childhood."

Cora sighed. His last questions involved her sex life and dietary habits. "Why the fuck do you need to know about that?" she laughed.

"It's only a question, Cora. We were all young once, were we not?" He continued to smile. Something about his smile didn't jive with Cora. In the dim light of the room, it reminded her of the jack-o'-lanterns children carved to chase away ghosts or evil spirits. His responses were too calculated, too finely molded, like circuitry. Again, she felt that dim sense of... it wasn't fear... what was it?

"I-- I remember little," she said. "I was raised in New Denver. My mother was a seamstress (a strange occupation, Cora knew, but that's what she was). I don't remember my father. I never met him."

"Are your memories of your mother vague?"

"Yes."

"And how do you explain this?"

"I don't. I suppose the V.I.D. erased them, too," Cora said.

“This makes little sense, Cora. Not withstanding the time and effort involved in tracing the input, what would the V.I.D. have to gain by it?”

“You tell me,” Cora said. “You seem to have all the answers. You asked, I answered. Next question...”

14

“I’m going to repeat a series of words to you, Cora. Respond in any fashion you find appropriate.”

Cora nodded, noting the emphasis he placed on the words. To her, it felt less like a cross-examination into the Consortium and more like an interrogation. At least, it would be over soon, she thought. If the situation was different, though, she would have broken the consort's quizzical neck by now.

"Ready?"

"Yes," she said.

The consort eyed her, inquisitively, then said, “... me-chan-ic... or-gan-ic...”

Cora gazed back at him, puzzled.

“... sim-u-la-cra... au-tom-a-ta...”

Cora shrugged. She'd heard the words before, and there was an obvious connection there, but it meant nothing to her.

“... an-droid... gy-noid...,” he continued, slowly.

“I don’t understand the point of this. You need to be more specif --”

“... *hal-le-lu-jah*...”

15

Cora lunged, her arms outstretched; what little space there was between them was closed in milliseconds.

Anders stepped forward to greet her... like clockwork.

16

Anders removed the straps from his ankles and stood to his feet, rubbing the temples behind his eyes. "How long was my upload?" he

asked. It seemed longer than usual.

"Sixteen hours. Your memory of the events should be gone within the hour," the retrieval tech said. "I suggest at least three to four hours of sleep. Plenty of fluids. Avoid alcohol for the next few days. You know the routine."

"Will do," Anders replied, never understanding why retrieval bothered with all this. Alcohol had no effect on him. His fluids were more akin to electric grease and oil. He ate but out of curiosity, not out of necessity. His sleep was dreamless and only down time.

"By the way...," Anders pointed to the monitor.

It was blank.

Todd Nelsen

Todd Nelsen's literary and film interests include horror, fantasy, and science fiction. He cites Stephen King, Robert E. Howard, and Hermann Hesse as influences. He is an avid fan of metal music and currently resides in Denver, Colorado, where he writes, reads, and is constantly fantasizing. His short fiction has been featured in numerous publications, including Schlock! The Pulpateers and Cellar Door – Words of Beauty, Tales of Terror.

The Ferryman

Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd

So now you've reached the end,

the open at the close,

Viewing a world born of sin

leaving fates damned and sowed.

Don't worry; it won't be long

till they awaken to their lives

Returning to normalcy,

as they clutch daydreams to survive.

Yet, someway, somehow, they all expect

to be the one to cheat death.

But you and I know the truth which awaits;

one cold and final breath.

Hell eternally licks its lips

for the broken and lost

Still so many live in evil

despite the hidden cost.

I row this endless river,

to this boat I am bound,

Searching for the wicked,

those not wishing to be found.

Here is where he flourishes

that one you call reaper,

To his domain we shall travel

my master, your keeper.

Along these crimson capillaries

You'll find nothing to bring joy;

Twisted minds more plentiful,

personal demons seeking to destroy.

Flesh eaters, blood suckers,

your worst nightmares come to life

Phantoms of guilty pasts

all individuals' hells are alike.

For they are built from fear

lurking in your darkest thoughts, alone…

Because in the end lies only fear-

fear is all that you will know.

Now, now, do not fret

for the end is almost nigh;

You mustn't dwell on what you've seen,

even nightmares have to die.

Here we are! We're at your stop,

It's time for you to wake!

Alas, this night, it's not your soul

The reaper plans to take…

Lincoln Andrews awoke with a start, his heart pounding frantically in his chest as his old eyes scanned the impending darkness surrounding him, searching for any remnant of the horrific images he had just witnessed.

Advanced in his years, with dementia slowly setting in, there were times he struggled with muddled thoughts. He shook his head as if trying to push away the scattered cobwebs that seemed to be infiltrating his brain more and more lately.

There were times when he had difficulty comprehending things, times when he couldn't remember names, places or faces.

But as that phantom figure had rowed the large boat resembling a canoe, sticking an ancient staff into the water as he maneuvered the vessel through capillaries branching out from a crimson river, Lincoln had recognized it all.

Remembered it all.

He tried to calm his breathing as he lay in his bed, afraid, and alone, wondering if the end might be knocking at his door.

Is that what the dream had meant?

Or had it simply been years of writing horror finally catching up with him?

It has been said that your life replays before you when you are near death.

But it wasn't his life he had seen, in what he was now certain had just been a dream.

On those smoldering shorelines were scenes from his novels.

All the horrific ideas that had made him infamous over the years beckoned to him as the boat passed by. Even the phantom ferryman guiding the craft had been one of his ideas – a ghoul he had dreamed up to haunt poor Beth Norton, in one of his twisted tales.

The terrifying creatures and supernatural villains that had brought him fame and fortune had manifested before his very eyes, and Lincoln had cowered in the back, trying to hide, trying not to look.

But the worst had been the victims.

And they were there, too. Staring at him with venom in their eyes…

Lincoln shivered and his feeble fingers clutched his blanket, tugging it up to his neck. Seemed he could never get warm these days. The constant chill he carried all the time felt as if it had manifested into icy claws that were wrapping around his soul, trying to snatch it from his body.

What if he did die right now?

Was there really a Heaven and a Hell?

Hot tears burned as they rolled down his cold cheeks and Lincoln thought of his beloved wife who had passed some years back. He thought of his kids, his grandchildren.

Had he not been good to them all? Provided well? Given to charities? Helped people in need…Sure, his writing had terrified many, but he had done good things in his life to counteract his sinister imagination.

If the gateway to the next realm was opening, where would it take him?

What time was it? Would this night never end?

Would the breaking dawn arrive for Lincoln Andrews this day?

He let go of his covering with one hand and felt for the pair of spectacles he always kept on the nightstand. He sighed when his hand felt the glasses, right where he always kept them.

Once he could see, he could turn on the light and…

The frames slid from his cold, stiff hand as he tried to grasp them, falling to the floor.

"Nooo!" he cried out. He knew if he tried to get out of bed without any help, he would most likely fall. He was alone in this old mansion until his nurse arrived in the morning.

He considered trying to phone his daughter. What would he tell her? *Can you come over; I've had a terrible dream…*

Surely she would laugh at him. Her father, the scariest man she knew, afraid of his own shadow tonight.

Phew! But even as he chided himself, the unease lingered. His chest hurt something awful. He had never had heart issues, but he was, after all, eighty-two.

Desperate for some semblance of comfort, he reached out in the blackness. The small Bible his wife read was always kept at his bedside, next to her picture.

This time he held on, bringing it tightly against him…

***

The voice on the other line was that of her father's nurse, Beth Norton, and Rebecca braced herself, because she could tell from the tone of the woman's voice it was not going to be good news. Beth explained that her father must've died peacefully, in his sleep, holding his Bible.

As Lincoln Andrews grief-stricken daughter sobbed, she barely heard the last phrase uttered by her dad's nurse.

"Funny," the woman said. "I never took your father for a religious man."

Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Convinced she was destined to be an artist, Suzie Lockhart attended 'The Art Institute' of Pittsburgh after graduating high school, but the gnawing urge to write always remained with her. She originally wanted to write romance novels, but after discovering the innate ability to tell chilling tales, Suzie embraced her inner-creepiness. When her son (Bruce) realized he had the same zest for the macabre, they teamed up. Two years later, their scary stories can be found in a variety of horror publications from Dark Moon Digest, Sirens Call, Horrified Press, Dark Lore, and an upcoming vampire story in *Diabolic Tales*. Suzie was one of the eighteen women appearing in *Mistresses of the Macabre*, released earlier this year, and is very happy to have a story she wrote with Bruce selected for an upcoming charity anthology, entitled *BLEED*, which will benefit victims of childhood cancer. Bruce was one of the men selected for Sirens Call *Men in Horror eZine*, and Suzie recently finished in the top ten for the *Women on Writing* spring competition. In the fall of 2012, 'Team Lockhart', as Suzie and her son have been pegged by one of their publishers (Horrified Press) delved into editing. After building a reputation as hard workers, they were asked by that same U.K. publisher to edit an entire anthology. Reading through all of the entries for *Nightmare Stalkers & Dream Walkers* has been an interesting journey to the other side of the writing industry. Horrified Press will also be releasing a

collection of Suzie and Bruce's short stories, entitled *Adventures in Horrorland*. Suzie and Bruce reside in Western Pennsylvania.

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FB: Suzie Wargo Lockhart / Bruce Lockhart

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Not only has he given us this incredible opportunity, but along the way we believe we have made a lifelong friend.

Secondly, we'd like to thank all of the amazing authors who accepted the challenge of writing about the one thing writers tend to avoid…dreams and nightmares. Not only did they think outside of the box, but we think the unbelievable talent they brought to the table really kicked ass in the process!

Someone else who certainly deserves mention is our good friend Lori Michelle, a brilliant writer and editor who helped mentor us, by giving us the chance to assist Dark Moon as Associate Editors… which is how, 'coincidentally', our paths crossed with Nathan's.

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Finally, to anyone who took the time to journey to end of this collective story, we encourage you to keep dreaming long after the pages close…

horrifiedpress.wordpress.com


NIGHTMARE
STALKERS
&
DREAM
WALKERS
Top 10 Finisher
Best Anthology
PREDITORS & EDITORS
READERS' POLL 2013
A COLLECTION OF TERRIFYING TALES
YOU COULDN'T IMAGINE IN YOUR WILDEST DREAMS